



THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER

NOVEL

6

written by
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Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: An Order from My Master](#)

[Chapter 2: Item Conversion](#)

[Chapter 3: Mira Santage](#)

[Chapter 4: The Monkey and the Present](#)

[Chapter 5: Hunting for Items](#)

[Chapter 6: The King of the School Year Competition](#)

[Chapter 7: I'd Give My Left Arm](#)

[Chapter 8: Face to Face](#)

[Chapter 9: Inter-school Tournament](#)

[Bonus Chapter: New Knowledge](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)

Lola put her hands
together as she
complimented me.

“You have.
Of course,
you’re still
cautious,
but you’ve
developed
a more...
manly side.
I like it!”

LOLA METROSE



EMMABRIGHTNESS

“Wow Noir,
your back is
soooo biig.”

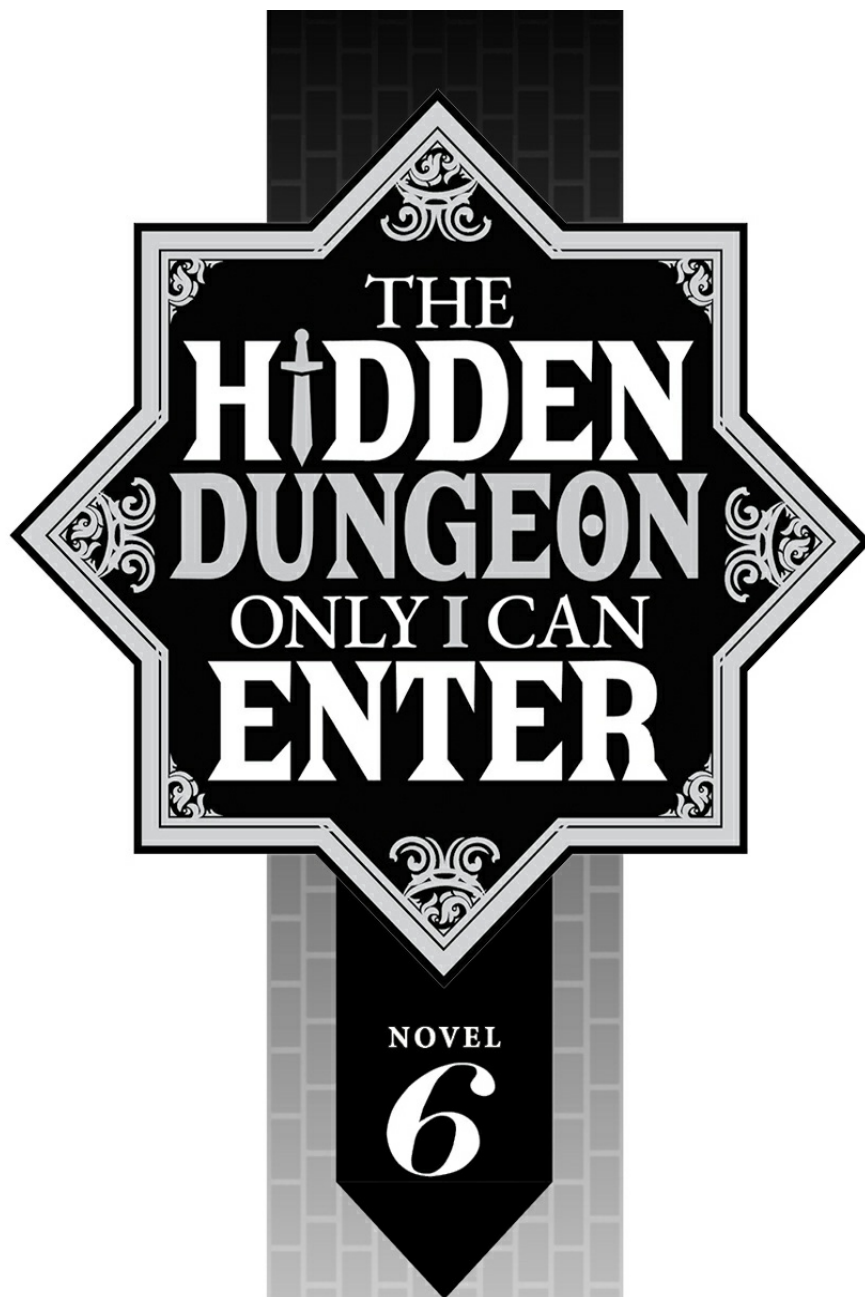
Something soft squished
against my back as a
drunk Emma snaked her
arms around me.

NOIR STARDIA



“Eek! Y—you
did that on
purpose.”

MIRA SANTAGE



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Seven Seas Entertainment

THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER VOL. 6

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CONTENTS

- 1** * An Order from My Master
- 2** * Item Conversion.....
- 3** * Mira Santage
- 4** * The Monkey and the Present
- 5** * Hunting for Items
- 6** * The King of the School Year Competition
- 7** * I'd Give My Left Arm
- 8** * Face to Face.....
- 9** * Inter-school Tournament

BONUS CHAPTERS

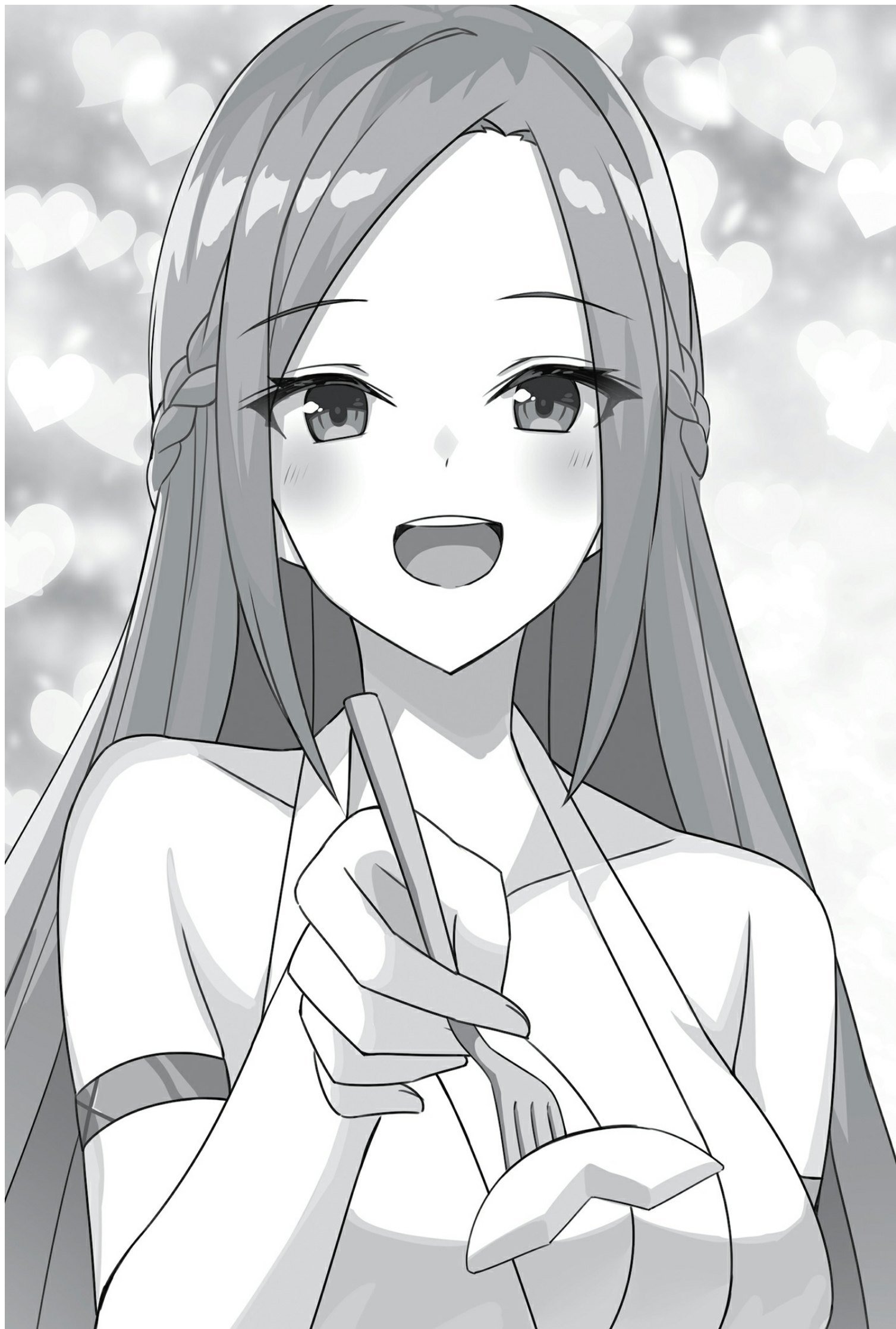
- * New Knowledge

Chapter 1:

An Order from My Master

IT HAD BEEN A FEW DAYS since I'd freed my master from her chains and brought her home. Olivia had fortified her body with skills, but she hadn't moved for two hundred years, and the Death Chains had been draining her energy the whole time. I was a little worried about her. It didn't seem like she'd fully regained her strength, and sometimes moving seemed to cause her pain. That said, she was in excellent spirits and fit right in with the Stardias. She'd become another member of the family, just like Tigerson.

"Open up, future husband," she said, feeding me a slice of apple.



Our family store, Stardian Rarities, was doing so well that our meals were becoming more lavish.

“You’re embarrassing me,” I said. “We’re not getting married. I mean...there’s a bit of an age difference.”

“Age is just a number. And five hundred years is nothing, as far as I’m concerned.”

I was pretty sure she was the only one who felt that way. Olivia pouted, stuffing her face with apples. She’d gorged herself on meat and vegetables first thing in the morning too. She had a skill that allowed her to live without eating, but she still seemed to derive great pleasure from it.

“Come on, Tigerbun,” she said. “Back me up!”

<Son, not bun! Tigerson! Are you even trying?!> Olivia wasn’t listening. My father was sitting across from her, and his face was something else. His gaze kept flitting about, like a teenage boy stealing glances at his crush—only he kept looking at her chest. His behavior didn’t go unnoticed. My mother and Alice knew him too well. They both glared icy daggers at him.

“Honey, could you buy some rope and bring it to me later?” my mother asked. “Meet me in front of a big tree in an empty park.”

“Huh? That sounds vaguely terrifying...”

She smiled calmly as she spoke, but then, my mother’s smile never faltered—not even when she was enraged. That’s what made her so scary. My father cowered like a mouse, and Alice smiled.

“No need to worry, Father, you can leave the store in our capable hands. And Brother dearest can serve as head of the household in your stead.”

“Can you stop talking like I’m about to die? You know I’d never consider killing myself.”

“Kill yourself? Oh, darling, I’m the one who’ll be killing you.”

He shuddered and gave me a pleading look.

I’m sorry, Father, I can’t help you, I’m distracted by how hot my soup is! I

could have sworn I heard someone mutter the words “you cold-blooded traitor,” but maybe it was just the wind.

When I was ready to leave, my master followed me to the front door.

“Come home soon, okay? I just don’t know what I’ll do with myself...” she teased, pushing her breasts together.

Honestly, now that she was free from those chains, I didn’t think I could stop her from doing whatever she wanted.

“Just don’t dig around my room, please.”

“I would never! Cross my heart and hope to die!”

The look on her face made me sure she was crossing her fingers behind her back. I’d had a feeling that might happen, so I’d already hidden some of my more private possessions.

“Also,” I said, “please let me know if you need anything.”

“A house, then.”

“Maybe ‘anything’ was the wrong word.”

“I’m serious! I can’t stay here forever. I mean, your house is nice and all, but it’s *tiny*.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Olivia was sleeping in the living room with Tigerson, and there wasn’t really much space to breathe anymore. I had offered her my room, but she had refused unless I agreed to sleep with her. And that seemed like a slightly...no, a *very* dangerous proposition. I was confident that the moment I fell asleep, she’d start “investigating” my body or something.

And besides, I had money to spare, so I promised I’d look for somewhere else for her to stay. I stepped out into the street at the perfect time to catch a certain girl running by. I wasn’t sure what drew my attention more: her bouncing breasts or her cheery smile. Either way, Emma was as cute as ever.

“How’s the view?” she asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You haven’t heard it before?! It’s like super popular with the girls lately.”

We set off together, and I asked her why. Emma snorted. “I know you’re looking at my boobs, dummy.”

Sorry, I’m so sorry!

“Hey, Noir, let’s give it our all this semester.”

“We better. I hear it’s a lot harder than the first.”

Vocational schools typically had a lot of events during the second semester, and the Hero Academy was no exception. Things were going to get busy. After all, the whole point was to train us to become heroes, so it couldn’t be all fun and games. I’d heard we also had a long history of competition with other schools. Whenever an event rolled around, each school sent their best students to represent them, although that was all I knew.

I wanted to get better at adventuring too. I was currently B-Rank, but I wanted to make it to S-Rank and become completely indispensable to the guild, just like my master Olivia.

We arrived at school and entered the S-Class classroom. Leila waved at us as we came in. She’d moved up from A-Class over the summer.

“How’s the view, Noir?”

“Huh?! I-I swear I’m looking at your eyes.” *I swear!*

Leila gave me a quizzical look. “Maybe it isn’t the best greeting after all. The other girls encouraged me to say it.”

She was such a trusting person. She’d probably just taken them at their word without realizing. Emma leaned over to whisper in Leila’s ear, and her face went bright red.

“I-I-I didn’t mean it like that! I don’t think you would be leering at girls first thing in the morning, Noir.”

I smiled awkwardly and bobbed my head in a vague not-quite-nod, not-quite-sulk. I hoped that someday, I’d become the kind of man who *didn’t* leer at girls... but then again, I *was* my father’s son. That day might well never come.

At that moment, the door flew open, and an exhausted-looking Ms. Elena strode in, carrying a wooden sword on her shoulder. Everyone took their seats like well-trained dogs. Including me, of course. If anything, I was probably the fastest.

“So anyway, boys...how’s the view?”

I guess even the teachers had heard about it. Several of the boys stared nervously straight down at their desks.

“I hope you’re all ready to work after your break. We’ve got a bunch of annoying events coming up. Personally, I’m not very excited, but I *am* your teacher. Back when I was a merc, I could just force my way through pointless tasks, but not anymore. I’m gettin’ paid too much for that here, and the only thing you can really trust is money.”

Was she, uh, doing okay?

The class listened to her intently, anxious to know what the future held.

“So the first event is a yearly competition called the King of the School Year Competition. The winner receives a special item from the school. It’s impressive, I guess.”

It had to be a valuable magical item or something. But that wasn’t the only prize.

“And the winner gets one more thing: the Right of the King. Yeah, yeah, don’t gimme that look. I think it’s stupid too.”

Ms. Elena looked annoyed as she explained what the “Right of the King” entailed: it gave the winner total control over the school for a day. It meant you could order the other students around and stuff—within reason, of course. Honestly, I was more interested in the item. But the boys had lust on their minds.

“Ms. Elena, d-d-does that mean I could make the girls wear sexy outfits and give me a m-m-massage?”

“Yeah, I think that would be possible.”

“Are you *serious*?!”

The earth-shattering cry boomed through the classroom. I managed not to add to it...barely.

But then it hit me. Could I use the Right of the King to earn a ton of LP? My struggle with the Death Chains had made me realize just how weak I was. I needed to stop fooling around and get stronger. I would probably have to tap into my inner well of desire to do it.

“You’ve still got time, so you best get training,” said Ms. Elena. “A little after the King Competition, we have an inter-school competition.”

Other kingdoms had hero academies too, and we had an agreement with our sister school. We weren’t going to pull our punches, even though it was just a school tournament. Three representatives of each school were selected to compete to determine the ultimate winner.

“Our representatives will be the three kings of the school. That’s it.”

One from the first, second, and third year, I guess? Maybe, if I worked hard, I could count myself among them.

After that, class went on as usual. We spent the whole morning listening to Ms. Elena lecture, and at lunch, Emma and Leila came over to talk to me.

“Heya, wanna eat together?” I asked.

“Sounds good,” said Leila. “Where should we sit?”

“I brought a lunch for you too, Noir!” said Emma.

“You’re a lifesaver. Olivia ate everything, even my leftovers.”

I was touched by her thoughtfulness, but Leila looked a little uncertain. She was hiding something behind her back, but it was too big to fully conceal it. I had a feeling I knew what it was.

“Oh, I, um, uh,” she stammered. “I kinda made lunch for all three of us.”

It was a huge basket.

“I probably shouldn’t have presumed.”

“Oh, not at all,” Emma said with genuine cheer. “Thank you so much!”



She stepped in and gave Leila a hug, and the act of intimacy soon drew attention. Our classmates all looked at them and smiled.

Leila had only just joined S-Class, and she wasn't a member of the nobility, but she'd already amassed an impressive number of fans. I could hear the boys whispering to each other.

"Man...I love Leila."

"Me too. She's a little tough. I like that."

You're not gonna like it when you're on the receiving end of her Demon Fist.

The three of us went up to the roof. There were always a lot of other students up there, so we found an empty corner to sit in and laid out our lunches.

Emma had brought bread stuffed with a mix of roasted pork, beef, and chicken. It was both bold and creative.

"Is this a new invention of yours?" I asked.

"Not mine! I promise it's tasty, though. Go on, have the first bite."

"I see, you want me to be the taste tester. Very well."

It was quite a challenge to bite into, but it was way tastier than I'd expected!

"Uh, um, would you two like to try mine?" Leila asked. "O-only if you feel like it."

She had some egg salad sandwiches and a fruit platter in her basket.

"Ooh, how luxurious."

Emma seemed happy to have expensive-looking fruit for dessert. I crammed the meat-filled bread into my mouth. It was as delicious as you'd expect. It was so kind of Leila to think of us too.

"How have things been going with Lahmu lately?" I asked her.

"Well...there's been a bit of an issue, but I think it'll work itself out."

She seemed a little uncomfortable. Emma and I belonged to Odin, while Leila was in our rival guild, Lahmu. I supposed it was a little unnatural for us to be fraternizing.

“You know, if you ever need help, you can come to us,” I said. “If there’s anything I can do, I would be more than happy to.”

Emma pouted. “Ugh, why are you being such a white knight, Noir?”

“Wh-white knight?”

“You know, a guy who always says nice things to any girl he meets, you big dummy.”

“I dunno how big I am, but you’re probably right about the dummy part.”

“Th-that’s not what I meant.”

“Really?”

Emma looked like she wanted to explain, but she was a little embarrassed. Her cheeks turned red. “Y-you may be a dummy, but you’re big...in my heart.”

“In your heart?!”

“It’s embarrassing! So I had to find a weird way to say it. You’re such a big dummy, Noir!”

Emma seemed a little agitated. She stood up and ran off, although she made sure to secure an egg salad sandwich and some of the fruit first. I mean, they *were* extremely delicious.

“Was she trying to prove something?” Leila mumbled gloomily.

After school, I went looking for a house for my master. Emma knew a good real estate agent, so she introduced us. He was a friendly man in his forties, but he was *extra* friendly with Emma. From what I understood, he mostly worked with the nobility—helping them find mansions and the like.

“My name is Domado. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Noir. I mean no offense, but you *are* a member of the nobility, are you not?”

“Yes, I’m the son of a baronet.”

His smile vanished, and he made no attempt to hide his disappointment. Honestly, I was fairly used to this kind of treatment. There were plenty of people who didn’t even consider me a noble. But this guy was different. This

was his business after all, and he quickly put his best smile back on.

“What are you looking for exactly?”

“I’m hoping for a comfortable estate with a big yard where I can relax. My budget’s around...let’s say two hundred million, tops.”

Domado’s eyes glimmered, intrigued. He knew a good property and took me there right away. It was a little outside town, but it was a chic two-story house. The imposing black iron fence contrasted with the gleaming white walls. It really was a sight to behold. It wasn’t currently inhabited, but it seemed to have been regularly maintained.

He told me about the property as he let me in. It seemed like it’d be a nice place to live.

“How much?”

“Two hundred and fifty million rel, but I could do it for two hundred, since you’re an acquaintance of Lady Emma’s.”

“If my master approves, then I’ll take it.”

“Well, then, I hope she does.”

I felt like I could trust him.

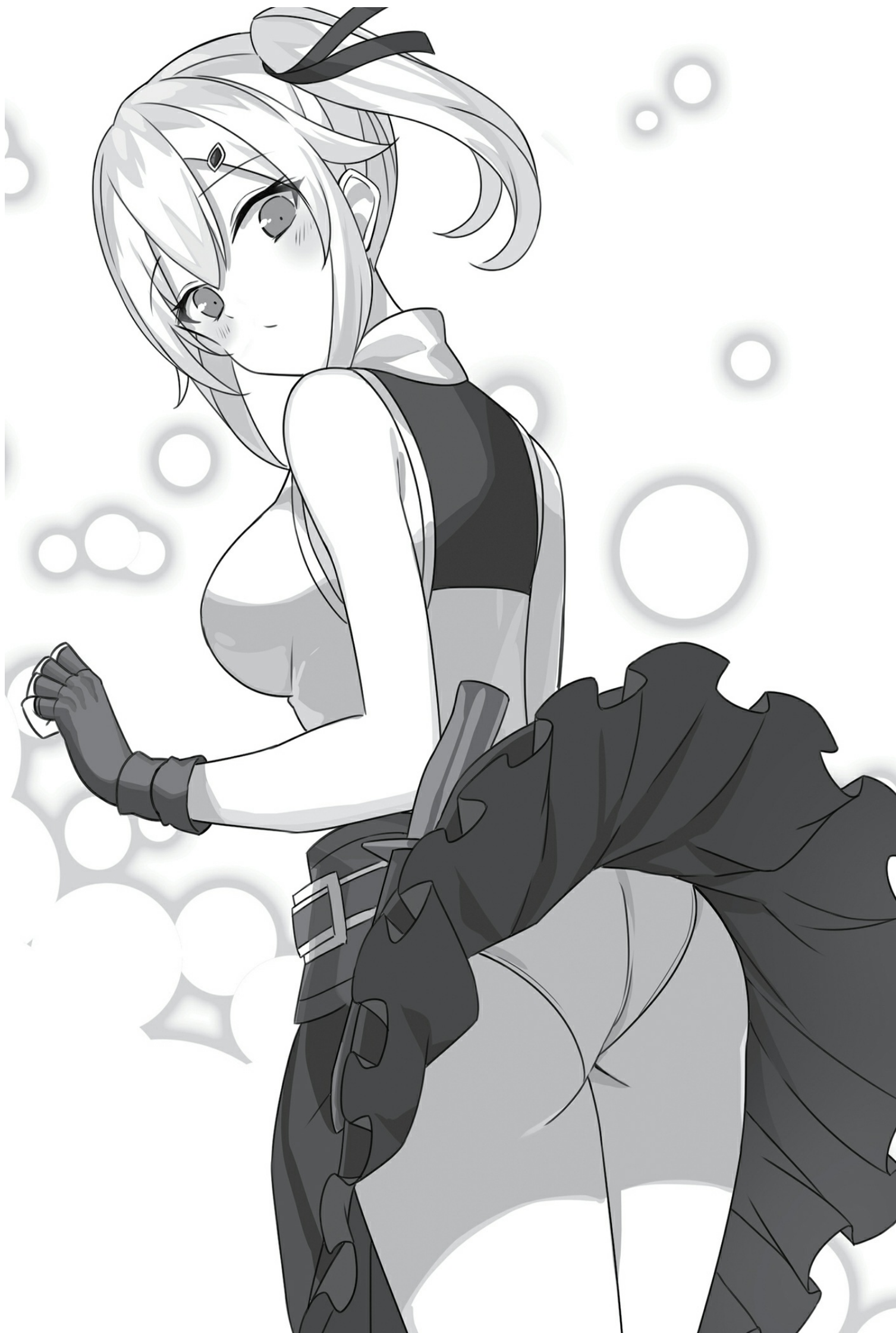
Once I’d finished with the tour, Emma and I went shopping. We looked around some weapons shops, but nothing caught our eye. As we said our goodbyes, Emma turned to face me.

“Could you ask Ms. Olivia if she’d consider training me?”

“Sure thing. She usually listens to me.”

“Thank you, Noir!”

Emma waved goodbye, and in that instant...a rush of wind flipped up her skirt.



“Eek!”

Hm, aqua blue, a bold choice. I earned a little LP from that. My guess was that my Lucky Lecher skill had gone off.

“Y-you looked, didn’t you?”

“I have a skill that lets me adjust my visual acuity, and I turned it down really low.”

“Yeah, right,” Emma said. “You’re such a perv.”

She ran off into the sunset.

Well, sorry for being a pervert, but surely it’s only natural for a boy in the throes of puberty, right? Mind you, my father was still a pervert, and puberty was a distant memory for him. With my mind full of such enlightened thoughts, I made my way home.

<Grrr...uugh, Noir, save me, please.> I found Olivia in the living room with Tigerson. She was playing aggressively with the tulip growing on his head.

“Why *do* you have a flower growing out of your head? Sure beats me!” She giggled.

Oh, no, you really need to be gentle with that! I recalled Tigerson saying his flower was as sensitive as a human’s genitals.

<Hnn! I told you, that’s sensitive!> Tigerson flopped over, breathing heavily and at his wit’s end.

I’m sorry, Tigerson, but as her lowly disciple, I’m in no position to stop her.

“If I may interrupt, master,” I said. “I found a house I think you’ll like.”

“Oh my god, I love you, Noir!”

Olivia threw her arms around me and stroked my hair.

“Get any LP?”

“Yeah...”

“You better save it up, okay? How else are you gonna surpass the great Olivia?”

Was that even possible? Sure, she had lost her three big skills when she gave them to me, but she'd learned an incredible amount from them before she did.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "That reminds me. Emma asked if you'd be willing to train her."

"Ugh... teaching girls is no fun."

"Don't be like that. I'd like you to train me too, while you're at it. I want to get stronger."

I looked right at her, brimming with sincerity, but saw nothing except impish glee in her eyes. She was treating my request like a joke.

"I'm serious!" I pleaded, lowering my head. "I want to clear the last level of the dungeon and become the greatest adventurer in the world. I want to completely transcend social status!"

"The great Olivia's training won't be a cakewalk, you know."

I knew that. If I wanted the guidance of the legendary adventurer herself, then I needed to prepare for the worst.

Olivia tickled Tigerson's flower as she gave it some serious thought. Tigerson's awkward moans filled the room. *Good luck, Tigerson...*

"All right, I have two conditions. First, I want you to earn a hundred thousand LP."

"A-a hundred thousand?" That was a lot. I wasn't sure whether I'd even earned that much LP in total since I first acquired her skills.

"Based on what you've told me, you still haven't quite gotten the hang of Editor and Bestow," she explained. "And I think that's a waste."

Using those skills effectively in combat required a lot of LP. I'd run into plenty of situations where the cost of disabling a powerful enemy skill got straight up ludicrous.

"Okay, I'll do it. What's the second condition?"

"I want you to break Sacrifice."

"Huh?! But why?"

Sacrifice allowed me to destroy skills to earn a temporary buff. It had been seriously handy when I fought the Death Chains. Without it, I might not have been able to save my master. But it also caused excessive strain on the body and using it over an extended period would physically weaken the user—making it easier for them to get sick, and ultimately shortening their lifespan.

“I’m sure you could make up for the lost skills with Get Creative, but the weaker you become, the more LP you’ll need just to sustain yourself.”

That made sense. I wasn’t super interested in harming my body, but Olivia seemed to have another problem with the skill as well.

“Relying on that technique makes you mentally weak too. You know that Litorean chick I beat up? Once she couldn’t use her precious Sacrifice skill, she was utter trash! Ah ha ha ha!”

Litorean was a cleric whom Olivia had fought in the past. As famous as she had been, she must’ve been *really* weak at the end for my master to laugh at her like that. I guessed Olivia was right; it was risky to rely too much on one technique. So I did as I was told, and I Edited Sacrifice’s description to nullify the skill. It didn’t cost very much at all.

“I did it.”

“Good boy. Now work on earning that LP!”

“Yes ma’am!”

I got right to work, hoping to earn what I’d promised to as soon as possible.

The next day, I made sure to hug everyone in the house and earn some LP before school. Admittedly, hugging my family didn’t earn me much LP, but that made sense. I didn’t exactly find them attractive. Although...why had I earned a ton from Alice stepping on me that one time? It remained a mystery.

Over breakfast, I struggled to come up with ideas for how to earn more. Olivia seemed to intuit as much and offered me some advice.

“You can earn LP by satisfying hunger, lust, or greed. But in the great Olivia’s case, the order was something like lust, then hunger, then greed. And since you

inherited Olivia's powers, it's probably the same for you."

"Sounds about right. I have noticed a bit of a bias."

I could earn decent LP from food, but it dropped significantly the second time I ate something.

"Now, my mom?" Oliva said. "She was all food, all the time."

"Your mom? Now that's hard to imagine. Wait, does that mean she had the skill too?"

"She sure did. And she was as dangerous as me too."

Apparently, when Olivia was a child, Meluna Servant had scolded her daughter all the time and made her cry. I couldn't even imagine it.

"As far as greed goes," she said, "especially the immaterial kind, your best bet is to set yourself a big goal and achieve it. You can earn LP that way too."

I *had* earned a lot of LP when I earned admission into the Hero Academy. Well, the obvious choice was right under my nose: I decided to win the King of the School Year Competition.

"Why don't you convert some enchanted items while you're at it?" Olivia asked. "You haven't used that skill much."

"Good thinking. You have the best ideas."

"I know one way you can thank me!"

Olivia closed her eyes and pursed her lips. I chuckled and stuffed my face with breakfast, which only made her whine and call me stingy. After that, I said my goodbyes and headed off.

Converting money and items was another way to earn LP. I didn't get much of a return from money, and besides, I needed the cash to buy Olivia that house, so items were the way to go. I could search for good ones in the hidden dungeon or while taking on adventuring requests.

At school, my classmates were getting excited about the upcoming tournament, so I listened in to gather some intel.

It was a short day, and class ended at noon. When we were done, Emma and I

headed to the guild.

“Are you giving the King Competition a serious shot, Emma?”

“Heck yeah, I am!” She almost seemed *too* enthusiastic. Emma pointed at me. “Even if I have to go up against you, I’m not pulling any punches. So, uh, good luck, I guess?”

“I’m angling to win myself, so I won’t hold back either.”

“Let’s both give it our all!” Emma said happily, locking arms with me.

It wasn’t really the kind of atmosphere you’d expect between two people destined to do battle.

When we arrived at the guild hall, Lola was talking to a group of four adventurers. When she noticed us, she waved and ran over.

“Mr. Noir! I’ve been waiting for you!”

Lola giggled and tried to hug me, but Emma slid in between us with her arms stretched out. “Perv thief block!”

“Who are you calling a pervert?!” Lola shot back, incensed. “I’ll have you know, I’m extremely vanilla!”

“All right, then, vanilla pervert block.”

“That’s an oxymoron!”

As they bickered, the party that Lola had been talking to approached timidly.

“Um, excuse me, Lola...but about that request?”

“Oh, right. Listen, I have something more important to tell everyone first. This is Noir, and he’s going to be our next ace. Well, honestly speaking, he already *is* our next ace.”

Lola winked at me. She was exaggerating, so I denied her claims as I introduced myself.

“Noir, what’s your adventurer rank?” a man asked.

He looked like their leader. When I told him I was B-Rank, they all looked shocked.

“Wh-whoa! You’re so young! If you have a moment, would you mind giving us some advice?”

“Please!”

They looked at me with gleaming eyes, but I was a little stumped. Honestly, I was still more likely to be on the receiving end of advice, but I supposed I *did* have more experience than them.

“When the going gets tough, you should get out of there,” I said. “Don’t push yourselves beyond your limits.”

“Thank you so much!”

My cowardly heart had kept me alive thus far, so that advice wouldn’t fail them. Once we were done, I asked Lola for an item-related request.

“I’ll gather some information just for you, Mr. Noir. But...do you think you could check in on Luna today?”

It seemed Luna had taken a request by herself, it being her day off from her cleric work. She’d set out early to exterminate monsters, and Lola was getting a little anxious.

“The request was to take care of some goblins in a little farming village, but it’s strange that she hasn’t come back yet...”

Most farming communities were about an hour’s walk away from town, and it was almost two in the afternoon. If Luna had left that morning, then she should have already come back.

“Are you asking us for a favor?” Emma asked.

I suspected the same thing as Emma did; it really seemed like Lola was just worried about her friend. I was a bit concerned myself. Even if it turned out to be nothing, it was worth checking out. And Emma was familiar with the area.

As we left town, Emma started looking proud.

“Noir, watch this.” She fired a powerful blast of wind at the ground, lifting herself up into the air. She went so high that I had to look straight up to keep track of her.

“Hiyaaaah!”

She swung her daggers as she dropped. It was a truly impressive move. Emma giggled as her skirt fluttered in the wind.

“Did you look?”

They were white! No, wait. Why had my eyes immediately been drawn *there*?

“That was really cool,” I said. “Is that a new technique?”

“Hee hee hee. Why don’t you take a peek?”

At her invitation, I used my Discerning Eye. The new skill was called Shockwave. Also, her level was higher than it had been the last time I checked. She really was training in secret.

“You’ve been working hard lately, huh?”

“Maybe one day I’ll be the one protecting you.”

She had a spring in her step as she walked. Emma had an affinity for wind magic, so it was easy to Bestow those kinds of skills on her. And she’d been providing me with a steady source of LP, so I figured I owed her something in return. I’d have to think on it.

We arrived in the farming village about an hour later and took a moment to survey the area from a distance. After all, there could have been monsters or bandits around. I didn’t see anyone in the general vicinity, so we approached the village.

A large crowd was gathered in the town square, so something had to be going on, although I couldn’t tell what it was through all the people. We entered cautiously and found someone at the back of the crowd.

“A friend of mine came here on an adventuring request earlier,” I said. “Did something happen?”

“Who’s this friend of yours?”

“A woman named Luna.”

“Something definitely happened. She started taking out goblins for us, but...”

Apparently, some other adventurers had arrived and insisted that the goblin

extermination job was theirs. When some more goblins arrived, they defeated them. Unsurprisingly, Luna wasn't having any of it. She got into it with the other adventurers, and it snowballed from there.

Had these other adventurers tried to snipe her job? I didn't know enough yet to make the call. It was a tricky situation. I headed toward the fight at the center of the crowd.

Luna was standing in the middle of the town square with her firearm drawn. Opposite her was an adventurer with a gnarly-looking morningstar. There were two other people in his party, but he seemed to be taking Luna on alone. Maybe they had agreed to go one-on-one.

"Luna, what's going on?" I called out.

"Sir Noir, Lady Emma...what are you doing here?"

"Lola asked us to check on you."

"Whoa, now," the other adventurer cut in. "You called in reinforcements? You're not backing down, are you?"

His tone was harsh, but Luna just shook her head. They were ready to tear into each other, and this guy looked plenty strong.

Name: Moisi Sousterre

Age: 28

Species: Human

Level: 104

Occupation: Adventurer; Mercenary

Skills: Superhuman Strength; Physical Defense (Grade A); Flail Bomb

His level was high, and he had some scary skills to boot. That Flail Bomb skill meant that, if he hit something hard enough with his weapon, he could cause an explosion.

Morningstars came in a few varieties, and his had several spikes sticking out from the ball. The handle was basically a stick, but the head was attached to a

long chain—giving it quite the reach. If he nailed you with that using his Superhuman Strength, it'd smash your bones to bits.

I checked his companions while I was at it, and they were all strong too. Mind you, Luna was pretty strong herself. Still, I wasn't confident that she'd come through this fight without a scratch.

"Hey, what guild are you guys with?" Emma asked.

"Efreet," Moisi replied immediately.

Efreet was another major guild, like Odin and Lahmu. They were known for picking up adventurers from other guilds. Either way, I wondered how we'd ended up in this situation to begin with.

"The goblin extermination job came from Odin. Are you guys here to snipe it?"

"Snipe it? We got the request from Efreet. If anyone's snipin', it's you guys."

He didn't sound like he was lying, which meant that the request had been posted to their guild too. Duplicate requests weren't a common problem, but they did happen.

I asked the head of the village about it, and he looked uncomfortable. It seemed to me that a duplicate request had almost definitely been made. Before I could interrogate the chief, he confessed.

"We put in requests with multiple guilds. We were planning to withdraw the others once one was accepted, but we were too late..."

That explained it. There was no way to know if or when a request would get picked up, so sometimes, they were submitted to multiple guilds. Normally, the client would withdraw the other requests once one was accepted, but it seemed they hadn't made it in time...

"In that case, why don't you guys just split the reward?" I suggested.

Moisi seemed troublingly dangerous, and I really didn't want Luna to fight him.

"No can do," he said. "You can either back off or settle this fair and square. Those are the only options."

“Sorry,” said Luna. “But I’m ready to fight too. They were extremely rude to me, and I’m not about to take that lying down.”

Luna was normally so level-headed, but she seemed quite upset. They must have insulted her.

The head of the village was too terrified to do anything either, so there really was nothing we could do but watch the fight unfold.

“Everyone, I must ask you all to kindly step back,” Luna said.

As the villagers complied, I took the opportunity to whisper some advice to Luna. “That flail can explode. Stay on your toes.”

“Got it. Thank you, Sir Noir.”

I stepped away, and the fight began. Luna readied her magical firearm.

“Energy Shot!”

Pew! Pew! She fired off two shots, but Moisi twisted deftly to dodge them. He clearly had a lot of experience if he could predict their paths so precisely.

Moisi swung his flail above his head and flung it forward. The spiked ball flew at Luna, picking up speed as it went. Since I’d warned her about its hidden effects, she made the right call and dodged a fair way back.

A thunderous boom shook the village and sent dirt flying into the air. It wasn’t that big of an explosion, but it would have been enough to kill.

“Heh, not half bad! But I’m not backing down!” Luna fired her weapon again. Each shot consumed her magic, so she couldn’t fire indefinitely, but she had learned to manage it well.

At first, Moisi dodged her shots and swung his flail, setting off explosions here and there. But the longer the fight went on, the thinner his stamina wore, and soon Luna’s shots began to graze him. They shredded his clothes, tore at his flesh, and made him bleed. What’s more, she focused her fire on his legs, hindering his movement. It wasn’t long before he couldn’t stand and he fell to his knees.

Luna approached him and held her gun to his head. “Ready to admit defeat?”

“Tsk, like hell I am...”

“I demand an apology for the awful things you said about Odin.”

So that’s what she was so mad about. Luna was a devout and selfless person, so it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that she couldn’t stand to hear her guild being disparaged.

“If you wanna kill me, go ahead,” said Moisi. “It’s not murder in a duel.”

He was telling the truth, but in reality, something like this could well start a war between our guilds. All the same, Luna’s glare hadn’t softened one bit.

“L-Luna, I think you should—”

“Y-yeah, I think we can take that as an admission of defeat, can’t we?”

Despite our pleas for mercy, Luna showed no intention of lowering her gun. “So you won’t take back what you said. Is that your final answer?”

“What’s it matter? If I bow my head to you Odin scum, I’ll be exiled.”

“Understood. You’ve made your decision.”

Sh-she isn’t...

Pew!

But she did. Luna fired at him at point-blank range. Moisi’s head snapped back and then hung limp, his face stiff. Everyone gulped.

Emma frantically grabbed my arm. “N-Noir, what do we do? Sh-she really did it...”

“Wait, he’s blinking.”

Moisi was alive. He checked his arms and legs, confused.

“What did you do? My scrapes and scratches are all gone. And I don’t feel tired anymore.”

“My gun isn’t just for shooting enemies,” said Luna. “Anyway, that settles it. The fee is ours.”

She flashed him a smile, then came over to join us.



“It was a Healing Shot, huh? That’s our Luna.” I should have known better. There was no way she’d commit a senseless murder. I felt embarrassed for even thinking she might.

“I can thank your advice for my victory, Sir Noir. I would have struggled without it.” She turned to the village chief. “Sir, please make the payment out to Odin.”

“V-very well,” the village chief replied meekly.

They had probably put down a deposit already, so everything would be settled once they paid the rest. As far as the members of Efreet went, they seemed to have accepted the outcome. Another fight seemed unlikely.

The three of us headed back to the guild hall and told Lola what had happened.

“That village chief lied to me. I told him to give us three days to take care of things on our own, if it wasn’t an emergency!”

Some adventurers violated request terms, so it made sense that the people who paid them sometimes did the same. The really awful people refused to pay up at all. Of course, the guild wouldn’t accept requests from such folks again, but they could always go to another guild and pull the same trick. There were several adventurers’ guilds in town, and most of them didn’t communicate with each other, so there was nothing to stop someone doing the rounds.

“I hate the way things are these days,” said Lola. “Why are the slimeballs always the ones who get ahead?”

She seemed more than a little upset, but soon enough her expression did a one-eighty, and she clasped my hands to give me some coins.

“Mr. Noir, please make a better world for us! I’ll help you earn all the LP you need. Here’s the down payment from the job. Hee hee.”

“I believe this belongs to Luna. I didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, is that so?! Well, good work, Luna.”

“Urgh, I hate feeling like a third wheel,” Luna complained, sounding genuinely troubled. “Maybe I should stop being friends with you.”

While changing society would no doubt be tricky, I could at least try to make Odin the top guild in town.

Chapter 2:

Item Conversion

I HAD THE DAY OFF, so I took my time getting out of bed. When I awoke, I heard my father screaming outside.

“Nooooir! Come downstairs! Hurry!”

I grumbled and walked down the stairs. When I got outside, my father was standing next to a massive pile of Giant Boar corpses. He looked like he was in a state of shock. What on earth...?

“Did you hunt those, Noir?”

“Me? No. Maybe Tigerson?”

“He went to the shop early with your mother and Alice. I don’t think it was him.”

Which made Olivia the most likely culprit. I headed back inside and found her sipping tea in the living room.

“That was you, wasn’t it? What are you doing with all those monsters?”

“Ah ha ha ha! I killed a few too many. I figured I could use them to pay you back, considering the whole house thing and all.”

“Well, I can sell their parts in the shop, so I should thank you for that at least.”

But my father was acting a little bizarre. “Lady Olivia, leave it all to me! Noir, do you mind if I sell them to a friend?”

“Fine by me. Just don’t give away the farm.”

“I love you, my dear boy!”

Once he left, I asked Olivia something that had been weighing on my mind. “Are you planning to go back to the hidden dungeon?”

“Hmm. I’m kinda bored with it to be honest. You can do it for me.”

“All right, well, I’ll be off then.”

“Just promise you won’t do anything dumb, okay?” she said. “I’m gonna sleep all day.”

She was going to bed already? She must have been tired.

I changed my clothes and headed to the hidden dungeon, taking a moment to check my status.

Level: 182

Current Weapons: Two-Edged Blade (Sharp Edge, Good Luck); Piercing Spear (Piercing); Shield of Champions (Durable, A-Grade Fire Resistance, A-Grade Water Resistance, A-Grade Wind Resistance); Unnamed Mallet (Stone Crusher); Enchanted Bow of Progress (Enhanced Archery); Shockwave Morningstar (Shockwave)

Skills: Great Sage; Get Creative; Bestow; Editor; LP Conversion; LP Conversion (Money); LP Conversion (Items); Stone Bullet; Holy Flame; Lightning Strike; Thunderbolt; Water Drop; Icicle; Iceball; Blinding Light; Willowy Dodge; Power Slash; Swordsmanship (Grade C); Exploding Arrow; Throwing (Grade B); Jumping (Grade A); Alchemy (Grade B); Discerning Eye; Discerning Eye for Items; Variable Visual Acuity; Pocket Dimension (Grade C); Dungeon Elevator; Butchering; Exorcism; Excavate; Improved Lunge; Improved Side Step; Improved Back Step; Passive Defense; Magical Fusion; Deodorize; Lucky Letcher; Shoulder Rub; Night Vision; Tail; Headache Immunity; Poison Resistance (Grade A); Paralysis Immunity (Grade C); Heat Resistance (Grade A); Petrification Immunity (Grade A); Abnormal Condition Recovery (Grade C); Mental Status Effect Immunity (Grade C); Courage; Hearing Protection; Dancing; Diving; Zero Breathing

Had I become a skill hoarder? Looking at it all laid out like that made me wonder. I had 7,200 LP too. I’d also had S-Grade Archery at one point, but I’d sacrificed it in the fight against the Death Chains to make myself stronger. I could have just made it again, but the thought of spending 3,500 LP was a little too painful. Maybe when I had more LP to spare, I’d reconsider.

I used my Dungeon Elevator to go straight to the fifteenth floor. Familiar cold air brushed against my skin. I was in a long, narrow room with gray walls and a dark gray floor. It was a very simple area. There had once been a big statue at the back, but it had been destroyed when I fought the Death Chains, revealing the stairs behind. Of course, the copy of my master that had been attached to the chains was gone too. I headed down.

The sixteenth floor looked almost stylish with its neat, brick-lined corridor. It was a straight shot, and I could hear a woman singing from the other end. It was beautiful, and when I listened, I realized it wasn't just one voice. Several people were singing in turn.

"What *is* that song?"

I continued down the hall, wary that it might be a trap. Eventually, I found myself in a large room with four women. They were all wearing dresses and looked to be in their twenties. They all had similar features, but their skin colors were all different: light, dark, tan, and one with an almost blueish pallor.

The four women turned to me in unison, but I felt no hostility from them. Quite the opposite in fact. They all smiled at me.

"Ooh, a cute boy."

"Come on, now, it's rude to say that."

"Yeah, he must be really strong to have made it this far."

"We have a great deal of love and respect for you~!"

They almost sang rather than spoke. There was something odd about them, but my Discerning Eye didn't work on them, which meant that they must have been created by the dungeon.

"If you would like to proceed beyond this point, you must pick one of us to come with you," said the tan one, sounding relaxed. "We are the Four Siren Sisters. I am the eldest, and I sing songs of destruction."

"I am the second sister, and I sing songs of healing."

"I am the third, and I sing songs of protection."

"And I am the fourth. I sing songs of encouragement."

A familiar pattern. Any of them might betray me at any point, but considering how these things tended to go, I needed to pick one before I could go on.

“Then I’ll go with the third sister, since I’m the third son.”

Plus, protection definitely sounded useful. And I wanted to make quick, decisive choices instead of worrying about every little detail.

“Thank you for picking me. I shall sing my best songs of protection for you.”

“My name’s Noir. What’s yours?”

“I do not have a name. You may simply call me the Third.”

The Third? That sure had an awkward ring. I had to wonder if their personalities differed in any meaningful way. The others didn’t seem particularly upset that I hadn’t chosen them.

“We ought to get going. Sisters, it’s time for the song of farewells.”

“La la la la la~!”

The three remaining sisters sang a stirring, up-tempo song. Their voices were beautiful. They stirred feelings of happiness, sadness, and pathos all mingled together. It raised my spirits. No wonder singers were so popular.

Maybe I should start practicing in secret.

As we moved on, I made sure to keep a half pace behind the Third, just to be safe. I would have been extremely happy if she turned out to be a nice girl, like Dory from the seventh floor, but there was still a good chance that she was an enemy. Suddenly, the passage became more complicated.

“Noir, I will protect you, so I hope you will return the favor.”

“I imagine I won’t be able to get to the next floor if I don’t.”

“You imagine correctly.”

It sounded like she knew where to find the stairs. Either that or she was the only one who could open the path to them. Maybe picking the sister who sang protection songs had been the right call.

“May your body become as hard as steel and sturdy as an ogre’s!”

Her voice was more than pleasant: I could feel my body growing stronger. That was pretty welcome.

We progressed down the corridor, turning here and there, until something clicked under my feet.

“Oh, no, don’t tell me...”

“Look.”

The Third pointed down the corridor, where bricks were peeling off the walls. They floated in the air, almost like they had a mind of their own. I was right—it was a trap! The hostile bricks hurled themselves toward us. Despite their vast numbers, every single one was aimed squarely for the Third.

“I’m going to die if you don’t do something.” Her tone was inhumanly calm, almost devoid of emotion.

“I’m not about to let that happen!”

I jumped in front of her and pulled the Shield of Champions from my Pocket Dimension. It was big enough that I could fit comfortably behind it while the bricks clanged harmlessly away.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes, I am unharmed. Let us go on.”

We continued our search.

“So your protection song doesn’t have any effect on you?” I asked.

“None whatsoever. To make matters worse, I’m quite frail.”

It would be best to assume that even a single brick would kill her. I ran through several scenarios in my head, debating whether it would be more sensible to Bestow a skill on her to improve her defense or if it would be better to give myself something. I felt like it’d depend on the situation, although the ideal would be nice if things stayed more or less like this all the way to the stairs.

“Turn the next corner and go straight on. You’ll find a room. The stairs are hidden in there.”

“Are there monsters in there?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

In other words, best to assume the answer was yes.

There was an open space at the end of the hall, just as the Third had said. But there was no door, and the stairs were nowhere to be seen. It was just an empty space—well, aside from the bricks that started pulling themselves off the wall when we entered. It was probably the same kind of trap as before.

I moved in front of the Third to protect her, but in the end, it was unnecessary. The bricks flew past us and began to pile up in the entrance. Moments later, they had closed off the entire space. It looked like I wasn’t going anywhere until I cleared the level. Of course, I could always use my Dungeon Elevator if I needed to, but I wanted to wait and see what happened first.

Bang, bang...bang! Bang!

It sounded like something was attacking the far wall. The stones were sturdy, but it didn’t take long for a hole to break through. It was too small for a grown person, but it was more than big enough for a goblin.

Eight of them streamed in, one after another. They were all quite small, only around three feet tall, and holding equally tiny spears. Perhaps the weapons had been tailor-made for them. They immediately surrounded me.

“I see what you’re doing!”

I was a little surprised when I looked at their abilities.

Name: Goblin

Level: 16

Skills: Agility (Grade A)

They were just normal goblins, and really low-level ones for this floor of the dungeon too. They all had A-Grade Agility, and I guessed they were planning to

use their speed to destroy the Third. It would be easier than defeating me, and it would likewise prevent me from reaching the next floor.

I executed the first strategy I came up with, using 500 LP to create the skill Stone Wall.

“Eeee!”

The goblins flew at the Third with their spears, and I acted quickly—manifesting a wall in front of her that was almost the same height as me. The goblins smashed into it head-first and fell to the floor. Things were off to a good start, but that wouldn’t be enough to protect her.

Stone Wall: Manifests a wall of stone in front of the user. Effect is temporary.

The size and strength of the wall depended on the user’s experience, magic reserves, and talent. I used Editor to make it easier to use.

Add “multiple walls can be connected to create a box.”

It only cost 600 LP, so I didn’t hesitate. After all, the goblins were coming at her from all sides.

“Crouch down, please!”

The Third did as I asked, and I quickly surrounded her with walls.

“Eek?!”

The goblins smashed into the stone box and tried to stab it with their spears, but it didn’t yield. I collected the spears from the fallen goblins. They turned on me next. Seemed they had some kind of decision-making ability after all. I fired off a Holy Flame and a Lightning Strike with one hand and swung my sword with the other—cutting down anything in close range. The goblins were nimble, so it took a while, but I defeated them without a scratch.

“Are you okay?” I asked the Third.

“Yes, I seem to be quite all right.”

As I wondered how to get her out of the box, the effect wore off and the walls vanished.

“I defeated the goblins,” I said. “Let’s look for the stairs.”

Admittedly, I wasn’t exactly sure how to do that. As far as I could tell, the room was empty. I peered through the hole the goblins had come through and saw another room on the other side. It was much the same as this one, and there was no sign of any doors or stairs in there either. The Third took that as her cue to squeeze through the hole.

“Things could get dicey in there,” I warned her.

“That won’t be an issue—because you’re coming with me.”

I followed her through the hole. The Third stood in front of one of the walls and looked back at me.

“The stairs are on the other side.”

“Of the wall? Should I destroy it?”

“No, no need. Open, o wall, let us through~!” she sang.

The lyrics were rather...literal. About twenty seconds later, the wall rumbled and opened up, revealing another small room. Ah, and there were the stairs to the next floor. I guessed there was some kind of trick, but surely I could have smashed my way through too.

“Congratulations, valiant one,” said the Third. “Good luck in the lower levels.”

“Thanks for all your help. What’s going to happen to you?”

“Nothing in particular. I will go on singing, as I always have. Just like this: Hurry on your way~! You don’t have all day~!”

“.....”

She was treating me like a pest.

“All right, you don’t have to say it twice. I’m going. Goodbye for now.”

“Fare thee well~! And never come back~!”

Well, that stung. I’d actually kinda liked her! Although I supposed it had been

a totally superficial relationship...

With her immense vocal talent to encourage me, I headed down to the seventeenth floor. Before long, her singing faded away, and the entire atmosphere of the dungeon changed.

For starters, it was so bright down here! And the sound of crashing waves was overwhelming. A sandy beach spread out before a vast ocean in front of me. Behind me was a huge green forest. I might as well have been on an island. The sun was even shining brightly overhead. If I hadn't known better, I'd never have guessed that I was still inside a dungeon.

Considering Dory's forest and the volcanic level, I really shouldn't have been surprised anymore, but it was still awe-inspiring every time.

"I guess it's a deserted island? I bet there are still monsters here. I should probably call it quits for now."

My elevator skill registered the new level as soon as I set foot on it, after all. Thus, I used my Dungeon Elevator and left. Given how big this floor looked, it would probably take me a while to find the next set of stairs.

On my way home, I asked the Great Sage how I should go about it.

<Give yourself a skill that allows you to sense enchanted items, or obtain an item that possesses such a skill. Use that skill to seek the stairs.>

Enchanted Item Perception was pricey at 5,000 LP. I could have managed it, but I figured it would be better to find an item with the skill already on it. I could have just asked the Great Sage where to find one, but I wanted to avoid that if I could. My head was already throbbing, and if it was a high-grade item, I'd probably get a massive headache for my trouble.

The King of the School Year Competition was nearly upon us, with the invitational battle with our sister school soon afterward. I was feeling more enthusiastic about class too. Ms. Elena was instructing us in the schoolyard under the brilliant sun. Everyone was careful to stay hydrated to avoid heatstroke.

Ms. Elena looked down on us from her perch atop a wooden practice sword that had been thrust into the dirt. She really enjoyed having the high ground.

“I think you’ll find today’s technique useful against both monsters and human opponents. But to be honest, I’m not a fan.”

It seemed she thought it might be valuable for us to know, even if she didn’t care for it. She leapt off her perch, retrieved her sword, and pointed it at me.

“Stand in front of me and hold your sword.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I did as I was told. I felt like I’d been put in this position a lot lately. She held me at sword-point, and for some reason, I started breathing harder.

“You should use this technique between the middle and end of an encounter. Remember, you can always use it if things are going poorly. All right, Noir, give me all you’ve got. Attack whenever you see an opening.”

“You got it.”

I’d been training every day, I had a C-Grade Swordsmanship skill, and I had acquired quite a bit of experience in combat. Even if Ms. Elena came at me with all her might, I was fairly confident that I could hold my own. At least for a while. Just as I’d calmed myself down, Ms. Elena rushed me.

“Haaaah!”

There was such intensity in her attack. I needed to keep my cool—uh? Her move was impressive, but she stumbled as she dashed forward. She managed to recover her balance, but she still ended up down on one knee. Ms. Elena grimaced. Huh, it really was a mistake. I couldn’t let the chance slip by. I closed the distance between us, swinging my wooden sword down toward her neck.

“Wha—?!”

Ms. Elena exploded with force and slipped behind me. She had been waiting for this moment. And then—whomp!—a furious swing, followed by the chilly sensation of her wooden sword on the back of my neck. If it had been a real sword, I probably wouldn’t have had a head anymore.

“It...was a bluff,” I said.

“Exactly. It’s so cheap. I don’t use it. But back in my days as a mercenary, I saw plenty of people win like that.”

I’d fallen for it completely, so it was a little unsettling to think about how many other people had too.

“Even if you don’t use the technique yourself, remember that other people might. You’re vulnerable when you think your opponent is wide open.”

She had a point. There were many tales of strong fighters getting ahead of themselves and then losing. Creating situations like this made it easier to execute riskier moves too.

“It’s a cowardly move for sure,” said Ms. Elena. “And some people won’t approve. I won’t tell you to use it. But for the purposes of this lesson, we’re going to practice it, as well as some countermeasures.”

We split up into pairs and got started. As usual, I was paired with Emma.

“So which one of us will do the acting?” she asked.

“Would you mind going first?” I asked. “I want to come up with some countermeasures.”

“All right!”

Emma started to approach me, then clutched her stomach and crumpled to the ground. Well, that worked. I feigned a swing and Emma parried, countering my attack in one swift motion. She stopped before actually hitting me, so it didn’t hurt, but it *did* make me realize how hard it was to defend against that kind of attack.

“It’s hard to tell if someone’s acting, huh?”

“Yeah. It’d be really hard to tell in the middle of a fight. But you’d also have to be brave to try it.”

It would be best to save it for when you were at a serious disadvantage. It would also probably work better on a hotheaded opponent.

“My turn. Let’s do this.”

I charged in with my weapon held high. I deliberately exaggerated my

movements, and Emma dodged me like a butterfly. I started panting and sat down on the ground.

“Haah, haah, I can’t go on.”

This was actually really embarrassing. You needed some acting skill to pull it off too. I planned to counter the moment Emma attacked, but instead, she dropped her weapon and embraced me tenderly...

“Nothing good comes from fighting. Let’s forgive each other’s transgressions and start again.”

“Emma...you’re right. And I just got something very valuable—LP.”

“Well, congrats.”

We joked around a bit, and it wasn’t long before I felt Ms. Elena’s bloodlust piercing straight through me.

“Excuse me, maggots! Do you find my class *that* dull?”

“O-oh, no...um... We have to replenish our life energy, so...”

“Oh, is that all? Well, I think your tanks should be full by now. Class, attention!”

Ms. Elena had a wicked smile on her face as she gathered the rest of the class around.

“You two are going to practice until the *entire* class agrees that your acting was perfect.”

“But...Ms. Elena...” we pleaded.

We’d never get to leave! Although I supposed it was our own fault for messing around.

It took us about ten times each before our classmates agreed we could stop. I wished I had the acting talent to fool Ms. Elena. At least by the time class ended, her mood seemed to have improved a bit. I took the chance to ask her about the upcoming King of the School Year Competition.

“Can you tell me anything about the enchanted item you get if you win?”

“Wait until the competition. You only get one prize, but there are several

options to choose from.”

That made sense. An archer wouldn't be very happy with an axe, after all. At least it was probably something good.

“Noir, remember that strength isn't always physical. People who are strong in the traditional sense don't win every battle. Never forget that.”

I burned her advice into my heart. Battle was never just a simple equation where the person with the highest level or most skills and experience was destined to win. Sometimes, the underdog could pull the rug out from under a certain victor. There were plenty of examples of people like that beating someone more objectively powerful. See, for example: my encounter with the Black Lancer in the hidden dungeon.

“Ms. Elena, have you ever defeated someone stronger than you?”

“You bet your ass I have. Who the hell do you think I am?”

Her fist flew through the air, stopping a hair's breadth from my nose. I had no time to react at all! I was amazed at how quickly she moved. Even Leila, who specialized in hand-to-hand combat, would probably have struggled.

“It doesn't matter if your opponent's got you beat on level, skills, and experience,” she said. “You can't let them beat you in here.”

She pointed at my chest.

“I won't forget it!”

Ms. Elena flashed me a beautiful smile, like she was proud of me. I was so lucky to have her as my teacher.

After school, I headed to the guild hall with Emma. Luna was busy at the temple, so the two of us planned to take a request on our own. We'd barely even said hello when Lola gave us some great news.

“I've been gathering information on magical implements like you asked, and I heard something *very* interesting. Mr. Noir, are you familiar with Klaston Cemetery?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

Normally, people were buried by the church, but there wasn’t enough space for everyone, so several graveyards had been established just outside town. Klaston Cemetery was one of them.

Lola held up her index finger with a solemn look on her face. “Rumor has it that there’s an enchanted sword there.”

“Who put an enchanted sword in a cemetery?”

“No one knows. All they do know is that it’s sticking out of the grave of a fallen knight. I don’t know if it was enchanted to begin with or whether it transformed over time.”

I’d heard about that happening. It was rare, but there were reports that, when someone died with regrets, their swords gradually absorbed those emotions and became enchanted blades. I supposed their owner’s wishes kind of leaked out of their corpse.

“Ugh, that’s kinda creepy,” Emma said, taken aback by the awfulness of the idea.

Lola seemed to be against the idea of pulling the sword from its resting place too. “Honestly, I think it sounds ghoulish. I thought you’d wanna know about it, but you should give it some serious thought before you try anything. It could be cursed...”

In other words, that meant I should bring someone who could lift curses, like Luna. The trouble was that if I waited too long, someone else might try to take it.

“Why don’t we just go check it out?” I said. “I have a Discerning Eye, so if it really *is* cursed, then we can get out of there without touching it.”

“You’ve grown so brave, Mr. Noir,” said Lola.

“Have I?”

“You have. Of course, you’re still cautious, but you’ve developed a more... manly side. I like it!”

I felt a little embarrassed. I probably had the hidden dungeon to thank for my

development. I'd started to really enjoy adventuring. Of course, I was still a chicken at heart, but maybe I'd developed a touch of boldness that helped balance it out.

"In other news, I have a message from Luna," said Lola. "She wants to see you this evening. I think she wants to talk about something."

"Got it," I said. "I'll go see her when we get back from the cemetery."

As we left the guild hall, I checked in with Emma to make sure she wanted to come. She'd seemed scared, and it wasn't like this was an official request.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Of course I'm coming with you. But if it really is dangerous, let's not push our luck, okay?"

"Of course."

"Also, about Luna's invitation... You'd better not go back to her place!"

"Don't worry," I said. "I mean, this is Luna we're talking about. If she wants to talk, it's probably something serious."

"Well, I sure hope so."

I was curious about what Luna wanted, but I was more impatient to find out about this enchanted sword, so we hurried to the cemetery. I knew roughly where it was, so we didn't get lost on the way.

The cemetery didn't have a caretaker or anything. It was just a plot of land with a bunch of headstones. It almost looked abandoned, but it did have a fence around it, and families of the deceased came by periodically to grieve, so it wasn't completely neglected. People often came by between morning and four in the afternoon to bring flowers, and it was around that time now.

"There are people here and there," I said. "I wonder where that sword is."

Emma looked around until something caught her eye. "Hey, isn't that man looking at something?"

He had a sword at his hip and looked kind of rugged. It was hard to tell whether he was a civilian or an adventurer. There were monsters outside town, so it was common for people to carry weapons. He was looking down intently at a sword that had been thrust into a mound of earth. That had to be it.

“Let’s get a closer look.”

I approached the man as I observed the sword carefully. It looked a little old, but the handle was fairly clean. The strangest thing about it was the blade, which was marked with what almost looked like black rust. It spiraled around the blade like a black serpent. It was hard to believe such a pattern was natural, no matter how badly the sword had deteriorated.

“Are you adventurers?” the man asked.

“Yeah. We were curious about this enchanted sword thing.”

“Figured,” he said. “Looks like that’s it.”

Just to be sure, I used my Discerning Eye for Items.

Incensing Blade

Grade B

Skills: Slashing Blade; Poison Blade; Electrified Handle

It certainly had...personality. I'd seen that Slashing Blade skill somewhere before, and Poison Blade was pretty self-explanatory—it inflicted poison on anyone it cut. But the most curious skill was Electrified Handle. I investigated further, and apparently, it gave anyone who grabbed it an electric shock. The skill only affected the hilt, but the blade could still poison you. If you made one wrong move, you'd be in real trouble. Even worse, it *could* well be the kind of poison that damaged skin on contact.

The man put his hand on my shoulder. "I bet you wanna try pulling that sword out. Well, I'd recommend against it. Everyone who's tried has collapsed on the spot."

"You didn't come here to try it yourself?" I asked.

"Nope. I just wanted to get a look at it. I'm not laying a finger on that thing. I don't want to get cursed."

Well, you don't have to worry about that, because it isn't cursed. Of course, I kept that to myself. Didn't want to give him any ideas.

The real question was how *I* could pull it out of the ground. I could make my body able to withstand the shock or nullify the shock itself. I had C-Grade Paralysis Immunity, which I thought would *probably* work, but the operative word was "probably."

Some manner of Thunder Resistance would also up my electrical affinity, and it might come in handy later.

Besides, destroying the Electrified Handle skill would cost 1,000 LP. I had no idea how much LP the sword would give me when I converted it, and I *definitely* didn't want to spend more than it was worth. At least giving myself a skill had other benefits.

But which grade should I go for? S-Grade Thunder Resistance cost 2,000 LP, while A-Grade was 1,200. I decided to splurge on the S-Grade and went to grab

the sword.

“Hey—didn’t you hear a word I said?!” the man demanded.

“Yeah, Noir!” Emma agreed. “You don’t know what might happen.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already taken measures to protect myself.”

I steeled myself and gripped the handle. I’d probably have been fine touching the blade, given that I had A-Grade Poison Resistance, but I didn’t want to chance it.

“Ow...”

Even a resistance skill wasn’t always enough to completely nullify a powerful attack, but it wasn’t too bad. It did make me wince, but it was nothing I couldn’t endure. Although holding it for an extended period of time would be tricky.

“Y-you’re okay?!”

“Wow...but...”

They seemed both astonished and concerned. Time to find out how much LP I could convert this thing into. When I saw the number 2,300, I went for it immediately. The weapon vanished, and the man’s expression froze in horror.

“I-i-i-it disappeared?! It was a cursed sword, so you made it disappear to dispose of it, right? I don’t wanna get dragged into this! Sorry, but I’m out of here!”

He ran off. Talk about an active imagination. I couldn’t hold back a chuckle, but Emma seemed just as scared.

“We have to run. If it really was cursed, we’re going to be in serious trouble!” she cried.

“Don’t worry.”

When I explained the situation, she looked deeply relieved. It seemed she’d been genuinely concerned that I might get cursed. In the end, I was up 300 LP *and* I’d acquired a strong elemental resistance skill. I was glad we’d made the trip.

On a related note, even identical weapons were worth different amounts of

LP, depending on their condition. For example, when I converted some lances with the C-Grade Dragon Killer skill, the ones in poor condition were only worth 500 LP, while the good ones were 1,500. If a weapon was in a poor condition, it was potentially more efficient to just wear it out rather than convert it.

We headed back to the guild hall. Lola seemed relieved when I told her I'd removed the sword. From there, I said goodbye to Emma and went looking for Luna. It was already dark.

"Hell yeah! Let's get hammered!"

People were shouting and the main street was crammed full of people heading home from work. It felt kind of lonesome to walk through their midst. It was a strange sensation—feeling lonely in a crowd. Maybe loneliness was just more pronounced around other people.

As I looked up at the beautiful crescent moon, I decided to ask the Great Sage where Luna was. But before I got a chance, I saw a group of three young men accosting a girl.

"What the hell?!" one of them shouted. "You just elbowed me! That hurt!"

"It's your fault for taking up the whole street," said the girl. "I didn't do anything wrong."

She was brave, and you didn't see red hair like hers often. She had it tied up in pigtails with cute ribbons. It looked very stylish. She had a stunning face and a body to match. No one could argue that she was beautiful. She certainly left an impression.

The girl went to walk away, but the men tried to block her path.

"Stop right there! What kind of apology is that?!"

The girl sighed with annoyance and glared at them. "I'm just giving you what you deserve. Besides, you're all way bigger than me. It's on you to watch where you're walking. Maybe you need to go back to elementary school, 'cause I don't think you learned anything there. Besides how to be an overconfident jerk to people younger than you."

She smirked, pleased that she'd gotten a rise out of them, and set off again. In

my opinion, they could have resolved this if one of them apologized, but things had spiraled out of control.

The men exchanged a few short grunts. It was obvious to anyone watching what they meant. They wanted to teach this girl a lesson.

The three of them went after her, and I followed behind them. I wasn't involved, but the possibility of them doing something awful meant that I couldn't just dip out.

The girl left the main street and crossed a bridge into a more "adult" part of town. The area was frequented mostly by horny men and sex workers—it wasn't exactly what I'd call a good area. The girl had a unique accent too. Perhaps she wasn't from around here.

She pressed on into a less populated district. The men glanced at each other and smirked—this was the perfect place to attack. Especially when the girl left the red-light district and pushed on into the slums. It was a depressing place. The streets were dotted with people in ragged clothes, and no one paid any mind to what was going on there. When the men were confident no one was going to interfere, they started shouting.

"Hey, little girl, look who's here!"

The girl stopped and turned around. She had a mischievous smile on her face. I wasn't the only one who was surprised by that.

"What are you smilin' at?!"

"Because this is my lucky day," she said. "Some spineless scumbags finally got the balls to fight me."

"Oh, I get it. You're one of *those*... Tryin' to bait us into attacking."

He'd completely snapped. I used my Discerning Eye on the men and discovered that they were treasure hunters.

Some treasure hunters belonged to guilds, but plenty didn't. Since they were so focused on finding treasure, they were a little different from your typical adventurer; some were so strong that a regular adventurer was no match for them, and these three were tough. They didn't have any notable skills, but a

normal person wouldn't have stood a chance against *one* of them, let alone three. But then...why would any normal person pick a fight with these three guys?

"She must be really confide—wh-whoa?!" I gasped.

Turned out there was a reason for her confidence.

Name: Mira Santage

Age: 16

Species: Human

Level: 256

Occupation: Student; Treasure Hunter

Skills: Pocket Dimension (Grade S); Enchanted Item Mastery

Sh-she was unstoppable!

I was surprised to discover that she was a treasure hunter too, but she was even more impressive than the others. Her Pocket Dimension was *massive*. This was *not* good. I had to stop her.

"Um, why don't you stop while you're ahead?" I asked the men as I approached. "This is still a public street, and even seasoned fighters can get hurt in a spat."

"Don't try to stop us, kid. We don't *want* to bully this little girl, but she's too uppity. Someone needs to teach her how to behave."

If anyone's going to be learning a lesson, I'm pretty sure it's you.

"You've got a good head on your shoulders, huh?" the girl, Mira, called out cheerfully. "But you should stay out of this. Don't worry, I'm not gonna kill 'em."

"You heard her, kid. We aren't gonna kill her either, so keep your nose out of our business."

Maybe the men were stronger when together or something? If that was the

case, then I could understand their confidence. But if they were fooled by her looks, well...

I couldn't tell which it was, so I decided to watch from the sidelines. The man with the strongest aura stepped forward, swinging one arm.

"Three men against a little girl would be embarrassing. I'll make you revisit your lunch with a single punch."

Ah... They have no idea how powerful she is, do they?

"Sorry, but I'd sooner die than let you lay a finger on me."

Huh? That was when I noticed Mira was gripping a black ball in one hand. She hadn't had it earlier, so she must've pulled it out of her Pocket Dimension. She took the peculiar item and threw it at the ground.

"Gah?!"

The ball bounced and hit the man in the stomach. It was obvious from his reaction that it had hit *hard*. Even more surprisingly, the ball mysteriously returned to Mira's hand. It almost looked as though it violated the laws of physics. I took the opportunity to use my Discerning Eye on it.

Magic Ball

Grade C

Skills: +10lbs; Elasticity; Automatic Return

It wasn't a very high-grade enchanted item, but it wasn't a normal ball either. Not only was it heavier than it looked, it could automatically return to its wielder. And it threw well too. Suddenly, its strange movements made sense.

"Wh-what the..."

"I really don't need to hear comments from the peanut gallery," Mira said.

"Hnngh?!"

She threw the ball again, bouncing it off the ground and smashing the man under his chin. He crumpled to the floor, out cold, and the ball zipped back to her hand.

"Get her!"

The other two men abandoned their pride and charged in, but it was over soon enough. They both fell prey to the ball. Mira left them just conscious enough to drag their fallen comrade away. They really were trash for picking a fight with a girl, but they did earn some points for not abandoning one of their own. They probably weren't rotten to the core.

Now Mira turned her interest to me. "You knew, didn't you? That I would wipe the floor with them."

"I wasn't *that* confident, but I could tell there was a huge gap in ability."

"You got a Discerning Eye, I take it? You better share some of your own secrets," she said menacingly, gripping the ball. "It's not fair that I'm the only one exposed here."

I gave her my name, age, and that I was a student and part-time adventurer, but I kept my abilities to myself.

"We're the same age, huh? Don't gotta worry about being polite then."

"You know, you're a little scary."

“Ah ha! I mean, I *am* strong! But don’t worry, I won’t hurt you. Let’s just talk. Ask me anything!”

“All right, then. How did you get so strong, Ms. Mira?”

“Good question. I guess it’s more like strength chose me.”

I wasn’t going to get anywhere like this. Mira’s eyes glimmered as she brought her face close to mine.

“Also, Ms. Mira?” she asked. “Oh, buddy, why so formal? I mean, we’re friends now, aren’t we?” Her pigtails swayed furiously, as if expressing her innermost feelings.

Friends...? When did that happen?

“You’re the first friend I’ve made in this town.” She flashed me a big toothy grin.



Chapter 3:

Mira Santage

MIRA INSISTED THAT I TELL HER where she could get something to eat.

Unfortunately, all the restaurants were packed, and she didn't want to wait in line, so we bought some beef skewers at a street stall. One of them was more than enough to fill you up, but Mira bought ten. She used her own money, so I couldn't exactly complain, but why did she need so many?

"You saw my skills, didn't you? Don't worry so much."

"Oh, your Pocket Dimension."

She nodded proudly. She had the S-Grade variant of the skill. That had to be able to hold an immense quantity of items. It also prevented them from deteriorating and even maintained their temperature—if you put hot food in it right away, you could pull it out any time and it'd still be fresh and delicious.

I bought myself a skewer, and then we headed for a park and found a bench.

"Did you come here from another country?" I asked.

Mira's clothes were refined, which made me think that her family had to be well-off. They also weren't the kind of clothes you saw around here.

"You can tell? I'm from the slopes of the Nakhod Empire."

"Are you an exchange student? Or are you here because of your parents?"

"My family runs a weapons shop, and they want to expand their business into your kingdom. I'm here with my dad, looking for a good location."

"Have you found a home yet?"

"I'm not planning on staying long. I have my own business here, so I tagged along. Once it's done, I'm going home."

I wonder if sightseeing was part of those plans. Also, this girl sure had an appetite. By the time I'd finished one skewer, she'd downed three—pulling them out of her Pocket Dimension, one after another, and gleefully popping them in her mouth. If this was the only side of her I'd seen, I would have

thought that she was just a regular teen girl.

“You a noble, Noir?”

“How’d you know? Although I bet people would laugh to hear me call myself that. I’m just a baronet’s son.”

“Do I look like someone who’d laugh at you, buddy? A noble’s a noble as far as I’m concerned; call yourself what you like.”

What did I do to deserve that lecture?

“By the way, you wouldn’t happen to know a good real estate agent, would you, Noir?” she asked.

“Actually, my best friend introduced me to one recently.”

“Ooh, you have a bestie?! Lucky you.”

That’s the part she jumped on? What about the real estate agent she was just asking about?

Mira’s eyes glimmered as she bombarded me with questions about Emma. It seemed like she wanted someone like that in her own life. I supposed that wasn’t unusual. A lot of people were envious of my relationship with Emma. Other boys usually mentioned how cute Emma was and how jealous they were, but we’d been together since we were kids. I’d always taken our relationship for granted. Moments like this made me appreciate her more.

“Right,” Mira said, once she was satisfied. “So you mentioned you knew a good agent?”

“Wasn’t that the original point of this conversation?” I asked.

“Aha! That’s a bit of a bad habit of mine. When something catches my attention, I just can’t help myself.” Mira grabbed me by my shoulders and smiled an ethereal smile. “I want you to introduce me. We’re friends now, aren’t we, buddy?”

“Can’t help but feel like this is a friendship of convenience...”

“Of course it’s not! All right, how ’bout this? If you introduce me...” Mira tugged at her shirt and looked bashful.

N-no way, was she going to let me touch her chest? Or let me look?

“I’ll let you touch my pigtails.”

I almost fell out of my seat.

“What kinda reaction is that?” she asked. “My pigtails aren’t your average hairstyle, I’ll have you know. Come on, get behind me and grab them.”

I didn’t really understand what was going on, but I got up from the bench, walked behind her, and wrapped my hands around her pigtails.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret: These are my core. They’re the secret source of my strength. So right now...you could do anything to me. Why don’t you try pulling on the right one?”

“Okay...”

I played along with her nonsense and tugged gently on her right pigtail.

“Oh, my god, Master Noooooir, you’re amazing, and hot, and dashing! The most powerful man in the world. Your kindness conceals great strength!”



“Wh-what the...”

“It makes me speak my mind,” Mira said, looking impish. “Why don’t you try the left one?”

I knew she was messing with me, but I was curious. I gave her left pigtail a little tug too.

“Aaah! Not there! I’ll completely lose my mind! Noir, you pervert!”

“Wh-what?!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! If anyone’s lost their mind, it’s you, Noir. Isn’t that funny?”

I glared at Mira. It seemed she saw me as no more than an amusing toy.

“Well, I need to get home,” I said. “Good luck finding an agent.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sorry. I could really use that introduction.”

“Fine. But I have a request of my own: If you have any enchanted items that you don’t need, will you sell them to me for cheap?”

Her family ran a weapons shop, after all, so she probably knew more about enchanted items than normal people. I could even convert normal items and weapons. So long as there were enough of them, and they were cheap, it would be worthwhile.

“Sure thing, buddy. I bet you can guess why my dad wanted to bring me along.”

I didn’t know her father, but it seemed obvious, now that I thought about it.

“Oh, right, your Pocket Dimension.”

“Bingo! I help out with transport. And I am, of course, very well compensated.”

I supposed that was why she could buy all those skewers without a second thought.

Mira pointed at an inn just outside the park. “That’s where I’m staying. Swing by once you’ve talked to that agent for me, okay?”

“I’ll be by in the next few days.”

“You’re a lifesaver! See ya later, Noir!”

Mira gave me a cute wave and left. I had mixed feelings about the encounter. On the one hand, I was happy to have made a new friend, but on the other, something felt off. But what was it...?

Strangely, I had earned another 100 LP too. Why was that? Maybe it had happened when I tugged on her left pigtail?

I headed out of the park after that. I’d been completely swept away in the flow of events, and it’d slipped my mind that I was supposed to be meeting Luna. I asked the Great Sage where to find her.

<*She is 389 yards to the northwest.*> Closer than I expected. It didn’t seem like she was on the main street either, so that would make her easier to find. I hurried in that direction until I caught sight of a woman with a killer figure. Situations like this made me glad that Luna stood out so much. She had just finished shopping and was coming out of a store.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said.

“Sir Noir, you came. I was actually just about to head to the guild hall.”

“You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes. Why don’t we chat over dinner? I found an unusual restaurant recently.”

“Ooh, that’s perfect! Let’s get going.”

I could earn some LP with delicious and unusual delicacies. It would probably be a little pricey, but when an opportunity like this presented itself, I was happy to take it.

We headed to the restaurant. It *did* seem fancy. The tables were all booths, giving the customers some privacy. Luna and I sat across from each other as our server read out the menu.

“If you’re looking for a delicacy, I’d recommend the Exciting Chili Noodles.”

I was excited just hearing about them! Apparently, the dish had dried blue

chilis in it, among other things. The server wouldn't tell me what "among other things" meant. Terrifying.

"It's very spicy and causes strange hiccups, but it is truly sublime."

"I'll try it," I said. "What about you, Luna?"

"I, uh...I'd rather not end up with a strange case of the hiccups."

"Really?" said the server. "The sweating reflex and the stimulation of your internal organs beautifies the skin. It's very popular with women."

"Okay, I'll have that then."

Turned out, Luna was concerned about her looks too. Not only was she pretty, but she was half elf. She probably aspired to maintain her beauty as long as possible.

As we waited for our food, she finally told me what she wanted to talk about. "Sir Noir, Lola told me that you're looking for an object with an enchanted item perception skill."

"Yeah, I could just make it, but it would be expensive."

"Occasionally, nobles come to the temple to see me. One of them collects items, and apparently, he owns such an object."

"Really?! Do you think he'll sell it?"

"I don't know, but I did get permission to visit his home. Why don't you come with me tomorrow?"

"Yes, please! If I could get an item like that, I could earn a ton of LP."

Luna nodded. She had some incredible connections through the temple. Even before I met her, she'd saved numerous people with her Lift Curse skill. I was sure lots of people were attracted to her selfless personality.

With absolutely perfect timing, our food arrived.

"Uh...."

"W-wow..."

We both recoiled in horror from the white noodles, piled high with red and

green spices. There was no soup. Apparently, it was trendy to eat plain noodles mixed with extremely hot spices. And it was what we had ordered, so there was no turning back now. We gulped, then charged headlong into the world of extreme spice.

Violent heat exploded in my mouth. Sweat poured from my scalp, running down my brow and back.

“You know...”

“The aftertaste is actually great.”

The initial impact was really strong, but it didn’t stick around. Normally, spicy food stayed on your tongue for a while, but this didn’t do that. And it went really well with the chilled noodles. We completely forgot what we were talking about, and before we realized it, we’d both cleared our bowls.

“It was much better than I expected. I see why it’s popular.”

It wasn’t really that strange in the end, but I still earned 600 LP.

“Sir Noir, perhaps we should get g—hic! Achoo!”

Luna’s usual calm tone was interrupted by a sneeze. It seemed something had happened to her.

“Wait, what did you just—hic! Achoo!” I hiccupped and then sneezed in a strangely smooth sequence.

“Oh, no—hic! Achoo!”

“Hic! Achoo! Y-you can say that aga—hic! Achoo!”

They were coming fast. It was kind of a mess. They seemed to come more frequently when we tried to talk, so we silently settled the bill and left. We said our hiccupy, sneezy goodbyes and headed our separate ways. Thankfully, it was over by the time I got home. If it had kept up all night, I think I would have cried.

I opened the front door and announced that I was home, but no one came. Something was going on in the living room. I could hear a swell of voices. When I got inside, everyone was excited. Why? Well, there was a massive pile of money on the table. My father was losing his mind over it.

“Mistress Olivia, would you share just a little with us?”

“Oh, I just don’t know~! Spin around five times and bark like a dog and we’ll see.”

“Woof! Woof! Woof!”

My father didn’t have a shred of pride when there was money at stake. Honestly, I was a little relieved. This was basically business as usual. If he’d done anything else, I’d have been concerned that he had a fever or something. Honestly, I was dazzled by the sight myself.

Alice rushed over to me. “Brother dearest, look what Ms. Olivia did! She put it on the table all at once.”

Olivia probably had a Pocket Dimension too.

“Master, how did you get this money?”

“Why, Noir? Do you doubt your master? How awful! I earned this fair and square.”

“I’d like to hear how, in detail.”

I heard her out. Olivia didn’t like hanging onto stuff, especially not in her Pocket Dimension, because she always just forgot she had it. But she did keep several powerful enchanted items in there. She had remembered one of them, tested it out, and ultimately decided that she didn’t need it. She’d figured that having the money made more sense, what with the house and all. A weapons shop dealer offered her three hundred thousand rel for it—not nearly worth the true value. I assumed she would have snapped at the guy, but apparently, she’d backed down.

“I thought my head was gonna explode, but then this nice old man offered me all this.”

The shop owner might not have realized the item’s worth, but one of his customers certainly had.

“He was so handsome too, so I had to give him a special discount. I let it go for three hundred mil.”

“That’s a *discount*...? What exactly did you sell?”

“Just this interdimensional lance thing. It sounds fancy, but it’s not very powerful. I thought about giving it to you, but I decided the money was more useful.”

“You know, I was going to buy that house for you...”

“Oh, come on, what kind of mentor would I be if I let my star pupil pay for something like that? Even Tigerson would tease me!”

<Indeed, I would.> Tigerson nodded emphatically. I appreciated his concern, but his gallant expression crumbled when Olivia started messing with the flower on his head.

Good luck, Tigerson.

“Brother dearest, you should take the money you set aside for Olivia’s estate and spend it on yourself.”

“Thanks, Alice, I think I might buy a new weapon or something.”

“Noir, don’t forget your family,” Father said, winking.

I couldn’t even look at him. If I gave him a large sum of money, he’d only do something stupid with it.

“Honey, are you really going to leech off your son? Are you a parasite?”

My mother pinched my father’s flabby stomach. His moans blended with Tigerson’s in a peculiar harmony that resounded through the house.

There was never a quiet day at the Stardia estate.

Chapter 4:

The Monkey and the Present

THE NEXT MORNING, I GOT UP, did my daily sword practice, ate breakfast, and headed out. I was planning to talk to the real estate agent whom Emma had introduced me to. This time, I brought Olivia along as well. Mr. Domado was already waiting in front of the estate we hoped to buy.

“Good morning. This is Olivia, the one who was interested in purchasing this place.”

“Wonderful to make your acquaintance,” said Mr. Domado. “Thank you for employing my services.”

“No problemo, little man, no problemo.” Olivia was being her usual flippant self.

Mr. Domado was a little taken aback. All I could really say was, well, you had to get used to her.

We looked around the house’s many rooms, including its huge living room. There were some minor details that Olivia seemed concerned about, and she pointed them out as we went along. Mr. Domado, diligent agent that he was, took notes. Her changes would cost extra, but Olivia had three hundred million at her disposal, so money wasn’t exactly a problem.

“Master, have you decided on this house?”

“Sure. It’s big, and it fits my tastes.”

I was glad things had gone so smoothly. Apparently, we just had to put down a small deposit and pay the rest when they handed over the property. The previous owner had left the furniture, so it could be cleaned up and reused. It wouldn’t be long before Olivia could move in.

Before we went, I told Mr. Domado about Mira. He seemed happy to earn another potential customer and asked me to introduce them as soon as possible.

As we left the house, Olivia raised her hands over her head and stretched.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “You’ll only have to live with me a little longer.”

“I guess I have a deadline to steal your virtue then.”

“I’m not sure you should be saying that to me,” I said. “Or in the middle of the street, attracting a bunch of attention. So I’m going to pretend I don’t know you. Bye!”

I ran away as fast as I could and hurried to where I’d planned to meet Luna. On my way, I ran into Emma.

“Noir, what are you up to?”

“I was just helping Olivia close on a house.”

“Where is she then?”

“Back at the new place. You should go talk to her. I’ve gotta get going.”

After all, I had already asked Olivia about training Emma.

I headed to the weapons shop to meet Luna and figured I’d do a little shopping first. Luna wasn’t there yet, so I headed inside—ignoring the splendid items on display and heading straight for the various cheap swords in the discount pile. I could discern how much LP they’d be worth by touching them. Most were between 10 and 100 LP. Not very much on their own, but if I bought ten, that could net me anything from a few hundred to a thousand LP—and for almost no effort. It was nothing to sneeze at. That said, money wasn’t exactly an infinite resource, so I selected the ones that would give me the most bang for my literal buck. When I brought them to the checkout, the shopkeep seemed puzzled.

“Kid, what are you gonna do with all these?”

“I practice a ton, so my blades get dull really quick.”

“Ooh, now that’s what I’m talking about! Since you’re such a hard worker, I’ll throw this one in as a bonus.”

He gave me a slender sword for free. This wasn’t a very common occurrence in weapons shops, and it was worth 80 LP to boot, so I was extra grateful.

While I waited for Luna, I converted the weapons I’d just bought. They earned

me 880 LP in total. Not half bad. Soon after that, Luna arrived.

“Wow, you’re early. We weren’t supposed to meet for another ten minutes.”

“I thought I’d buy some weapons. I already converted them to LP.”

“You sure are working hard, and on a weekend too. You’re making me look bad.”

“I’m just trying to better myself. And you know I can’t compete with you, Luna. You’re a cleric. Your work actually helps other people.”

“Oh, now you’re embarrassing me. W-well, should we get going?”

We were heading to see Baron Trower. Schuren Trower was a forty-five-year-old bachelor. He wasn’t divorced, he’d just never married. It was unusual, to say the least. Most noble men got married by their late twenties, and surely there were plenty of candidates. He was a baron, after all. He had a maid, but his life was kind of a mess, and his health often suffered as a result. That was how Luna knew him.

“He collects enchanted items as a hobby. I asked him how he acquired them, and he mentioned he had an item that helped. He has an extra one too.”

“Wow, that’s incredible...”

If he had two, it was possible I’d be able to convince him to give me one of them.

The baron’s estate was smaller than I expected. The yard was much fancier than that of a regular person’s home, but it was unimpressive for a noble. Mind you, it was still nicer than my family’s yard. There was an older man mowing the lawn when we arrived. He spotted us and took us to the front door, where a maid took us to Schuren’s room.

“Lord Schuren, Ms. Luna is here to see you.”

“See her in, Mirenka.”

Schuren was a tall man with sharp eyes. He was much more handsome than I’d expected, but on closer inspection, he had dark circles under his eyes. Judging from the pile of books on his desk, he must’ve pulled an all-nighter.

“I see you’ve not slept again,” said Luna. “No amount of Healing Shots can help you with that, you know.”

“Ah ha ha... Don’t look at me like that. I appreciate all you’ve done for me. Is this your friend?”

“Yes, it is indeed.”

I bowed my head and introduced myself.

“The Stardia boy! You’re the one who saved the duke’s daughter, aren’t you?”

“I did help lift the curse, with the help of Luna and my other friends.”

“Incredible. I was looking for an enchanted item to lift the curse, but even the rarest of them was not powerful enough to break it.” The baron’s face was tinged with frustration for a moment, but he immediately cheered up. “I’m overjoyed to meet a real hero! You wanted to know about enchanted items? I’ll tell you whatever you’d like.”

Schuren seemed to be in a good mood. It put me at ease. I got straight to the point and told him that I was looking for something with Enchanted Item Perception, and that I was willing to pay a great sum. I also noted that, if he wasn’t willing to sell, I would appreciate it if he told me how to find one myself.

“Why do you want to collect enchanted items?” he asked.

“For dungeon exploration,” I said. “And to make myself stronger.”

“So you’re mostly concerned with utility. Excellent! I’m more of a collector myself. I generally obtain items from other kingdoms, or by visiting other continents.”

That was bad news for me. I didn’t have time to cross the ocean. If that was my only option, it would be easier to eat the cost of making the skill myself.

“That said,” Schuren went on, “since you saved the duke’s daughter, I feel obligated to help you. I can sell you one of my items for a reasonable price—”

“Are you sure?!”

He flashed me a toothy grin. “Under one condition.”

Schuren’s parents were visiting in five days, and apparently, they were

pestering him about not having married yet. They wanted grandchildren, and he wanted us to help shut them up.

“And by ‘shut them up,’ I mean with force. They promised that if I could beat them in a fight, even with enchanted items, they would stop pestering.”

“How old are your parents?”

“They’re both sixty-five this year, but don’t let that fool you. They’re both incredibly strong. I can hire whoever I like to face them, since they would also consider that an expression of my abilities.”

Based on what he told us, his parents seemed surprisingly open-minded. Schuren’s shoulders drooped. Apparently, he had hired ten people so far, and all of them had failed miserably. His parents still regularly hunted monsters, so they were extremely powerful.

“I might be their flesh and blood, but I have no particular gift for combat. Perhaps it’s that insecurity that makes me so interested in enchanted items...”

“I don’t think you have anything to be insecure about,” Luna said. “You’re trying to make up for your shortcomings in other ways. I would never look down on someone for that.”

“You really are incredible,” said Schuren. “On the topic of the fight, how do you both feel about taking them on, two against two?”

From the sounds of it, a one-on-one victory would also count, but I wanted to beat them both. Schuren seemed to feel the same way. I didn’t have an issue with it, so I turned to Luna.

“Sounds good to me,” she said. “I’d be happy to help.”

“I appreciate it, Luna,” I told her.

“I mean, one of my party members is in need. How could I not offer up my gun? Plus, I’m kind of curious about his parents.”

They had to be incredible to be tearing up monsters at sixty-five.

“I’ll tell them,” said Schuren. “If you can’t beat them, I think I’ll have to give up and get married.”

The fight would take place in five days, in the yard before his house.

“Why do you think Mr. Schuren doesn’t want to get married?” I asked Luna as we left.

“He probably just wants to keep collecting, but I think he gets lonely sometimes.”

I couldn’t help thinking that getting married might make his life more stable. As we headed out, Schuren’s maid came out running after us. Her name was Mirenka, if I recalled correctly.

“Excuse me, Lord Schuren forgot to tell you something. Do you have a moment?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“He said that his father wears heavy armor, so light attacks won’t work.”

“Got it. Thanks for letting us know.”

Mirenka bowed and ran back inside. She was around thirty, and she seemed like a very loyal woman. She also looked good in a maid uniform and was surely skilled at her job.

“Hang on a second,” Luna called after her. “You wouldn’t happen to know if Mr. Schuren is in love with someone, would you? I’m curious.” Luna held out a coin. Honestly, I was a little shocked to see her try that.

“I apologize,” said Mirenka. “But I cannot accept. I can’t tell you anything unless Lord Schuren permits it.”

“I got it. Thought as much. Sorry for asking such a rude question.”

“Oh, no, don’t apologize. I’m the one who’s been rude, and to a cleric like yourself. If you’ll excuse me.”

Mirenka ran off, and I asked Luna why she’d offered to pay for that information.

“I was just worried that his servants might sell him out. It was awful of me to test her like that.”

It was probably a relief to find out Mirekna wouldn’t sell out her master .

Perhaps Schuren just had a keen eye for the people.

After that, we decided to pick up a request from the guild. That way, we could earn a little money *and* get some practice for our upcoming tag-team battle. Odin's guild hall was as bustling as ever. We seemed to be winning the fight for new recruits. I was glad that people were picking us over Lahmu, Efrete, Shiva, and the others. When we greeted Lola, she was all smiles as usual.

"Looks like you're swimming in new recruits."

"I sure am," she said. "But the real test isn't until next month. That's when the people from the country come to town. It happens every year. Right now, the other guilds aren't really giving it their all."

It wouldn't be long before the height of the guild scouting battle arrived. After all, the guilds prospered on the backs of their best adventurers. And the best way to get quality adventurers was to woo promising youngsters.

We asked Lola if she had any suitable requests for us, and she told us that hand monkeys, a kind of monster, were running rampant in the forest. There was a request for one of their corpses.

"Hand monkeys come from another land," Lola explained. "So we don't know much about their biology. I'm sure you can manage to collect one of them for science, Mr. Noir."

"The pay is good too," I said. "I'll do it."

"Be careful, okay? We already had some adventurers withdraw from this request. Also, once you complete it, the guild has something to discuss with you."

"It does?"

I was confused. Lola brought a finger to her mouth.

"And I have something to discuss with you," she whispered. "I hope you're excited~!"

She enunciated each syllable slowly and lasciviously with her plump lips. I felt my cheeks flush, but I kept my cool.

At Luna's suggestion, we stopped by a secondhand shop to look for anything

that was strong against monkey-type enemies. When we asked the owner, she took a ball down from the shelf.

“A ball of spider silkworm cocoon is good against them. It’s very sticky.”

Normal silkworms produced silk, but spider silkworm silk was sticky and very hard to use. That was where they got the “spider” part of their name. But their silk was useful for items like this one. It didn’t have any skills, but it was exceptionally sticky, so getting hit by it was extremely unpleasant. But an “unpleasant” effect alone wasn’t worth that much in a fight.

“Monkeys move between trees,” the owner explained. “So if you were to apply this to the branches, then...”

Oh, I get it. The monkey would get stuck as it moved. The silk might even make it lose its balance and fall. As long as we didn’t let the monster get away, we’d have it beat.

“But that seems kind of difficult,” I said. “How will we know which tree to use it on?”

“I guess we could just buy out the store’s stock and try out different options,” Luna suggested.

The store had twenty balls for three thousand rels each. The reward for completing the request was three *hundred* thousand rels, so after consulting with Luna, I decided to buy them all.

“Really? Thank goodness! These were never going to move. I’ll give you a discount.”

The shopkeep dropped the price to two thousand rels each. Even if we couldn’t use all the balls against the monkeys, I was sure we’d find other uses for them.

I took a moment to investigate the silk balls. They had a sand-filled bag at their core, around which the silk threads were wrapped tightly. If they had been made of silk alone, they wouldn’t have been heavy enough to throw.

“Can I let you handle those, Sir Noir?”

“You got it. You’ve got your gun to worry about anyway.”

Our preparations complete, we headed to the forest.

Emma set out at a brisk pace to find Olivia, as Noir had suggested. Olivia's bombshell figure and light blue hair were extremely unusual, so she wasn't hard to spot.

"Ms. Oliviaaaa, I've been looking for you."

"Oh, it's you... Who are you again?"

Emma almost fell over. Olivia didn't even sound like she was joking. That made her question sting that much more.

"I'm Emma, Noir's best friend!"

"Oh, right, right... So why are you here? If you want Noir all to yourself, you're gonna have to go through me first."

As much as Emma wanted to say that she'd known Noir much longer, she ignored the comment and got down to business, asking Olivia to train her. But Olivia turned her down immediately.

Emma was shocked at the snappy rejection, but she persisted—asserting that she wanted to get stronger, no matter what it took. After that, Olivia's attitude softened.

"Why do you want to get stronger?"

"Because Noir's grown so much, and I want to keep up. I want to beat him in the King of the School Year Competition."

"I'm not sure that'll earn you any points in his book."

Emma groaned a little, but she had a plan—when she won, she would give Noir the prize. Olivia was about to argue that it would wound his pride as a man, but she found the idea amusing. On a whim, she agreed to give Emma special lessons.

"Noir's growing by the day," Olivia said. "And you'll never be able to win a normal fight, honey. Ah ha ha ha ha!"

"I-Is that funny?"

Emma wasn't really sure how to react. Olivia saw how flustered she was and grew more serious, explaining her strategy.

"You've gotta use that body of yours. I mean, your chest is massive, I'm sure it'll work."

Emma wasn't especially keen about using sex appeal, but Olivia just called her second-rate for being so particular. So much for being willing to "do anything" to win!

Olivia explained that a fighter should never use a specific tactic unless they knew, for certain, that they could win with it. She argued that, amongst animals, insects, and even monsters, no creature had one set strategy. "The strong are victorious and the victorious are strong. Nothing more, nothing less."

Emma took the hint. "Fine, I'll do it. But how should I approach it, Ms. Olivia?"

"Ah ha! Now that's the spirit!"

Olivia jumped on Emma's change of heart and began instructing her on how to use womanly wiles in combat. She started by explaining how to make her ample chest bounce more as she moved, and the importance of wearing clothes that emphasized her cleavage. Olivia also recommended deliberately ripping her skirt so it seemed like her opponent might get a look at any moment.

Emma was decidedly unenthused about these stupid-sounding tactics.

"I'm telling you, it's effective," said Olivia. "You just gotta give your opponent the *impression* that they're gonna get a look, but not actually let them see. People get super distracted by that sort of thing. Plus, when a young man gets...*excited* he'll be desperate to hide the tent in his pants."

Olivia chuckled heartily. Men got so embarrassed when others could tell they were turned on and would pull back to conceal it. That greatly reduced their combat ability. Olivia's strategy was to force that situation. Emma didn't fully understand, but Olivia was convincing.

"Emma, honey, you already use two daggers, so it's totally perfect! You can push your boobs together while you fight!"

"Is that really going to work?"

“Totally. Your body is your weapon. Honestly, I’m a little jealous.”

“But, Ms. Olivia, you’re quite—”

“It’s not the same. This is all thanks to skills.”

Olivia stared off into the distance as she explained. Her mother, Meluna, had possessed a stunning figure, and Olivia had always believed that, someday, she would look like her. But by fourteen or fifteen, she still hadn’t developed at all. Sure, she’d grown taller, but her breasts hadn’t filled in. She’d thought it was odd and ultimately discovered that her mother had altered her body with the Big Breasts skill. When Olivia confronted her about this, Meluna replied proudly, “I have the power to change my genes *and* my destiny! Ah ha ha ha ha!”

Olivia had followed in her mother’s footsteps and did the same thing.

Emma was curious about the skills involved. “Does that mean your mother could use Get Creative and Editor too?”

“Exactly. She was extremely strong. People would cower in fear at the mere mention of her name.”

“Hang on, Meluna Servant...”

Emma remembered the name from world history lessons. Meluna and her sister had defeated an evil organization that was trying to take over the world. It had already taken root everywhere and it had been a hair’s breadth away from total domination when the sisters defeated it. If they hadn’t been around, the world might have turned out quite different. It was a big deal.

“I wonder if Mom’s still alive,” said Olivia. “Maybe she got tired and stopped prolonging her life. If she *is* still around, I’d like her to meet Noir.”

Olivia explained that Meluna had gathered *far* more LP than Olivia ever had. She was human, so she should by all rights have been dead by now, but with that much LP, there was no limit to how long she could extend her life.

“Is your mother as...uninhibited as you, Ms. Olivia?”

“I think Mom would consider me the more serious one.”

That settled it. Emma never wanted Noir to meet that woman.

We headed to one of the smaller forests near town. Even if we just walked around, our chances of encountering one of these monkeys was high.

“Sir Noir, I have something to show you.”

Right after we arrived in the forest, Luna pulled her gun out of its holster, pointed it at a nearby boulder, and bang! It sounded much heavier than her usual Energy Shot. The shot was bigger too. And slower. The moment it hit the boulder, the rock went flying up and shattered everywhere. I was in awe.

“It’s a new skill I learned—Impact Shot. It hits with a lot of force.”

“That’s so cool! I bet you could take down any monster around here in one hit.”

“Everyone else has been getting so much stronger,” said Luna. “I didn’t want to get left behind. I want to learn a higher-level Healing Shot next.”

Emma was doing the same thing. All the women in my life were such hard workers. And having a healer around was really valuable. I was glad to have her along.

“It’s not a new skill, but I came up with an idea,”

I took out one of the silk balls. We needed them to be sticky, but they were so sticky that they were difficult to use. If nothing else, they wouldn’t leave your hand very easily. Wearing gloves only made it worse. To throw one, you had to minimize contact and only touch them with your fingertips. Of course, that greatly reduced your accuracy. I tried throwing one at a tree, but it wouldn’t leave my hand.

“I get why these weren’t selling.”

“They’re just *too* sticky,” Luna agreed. “How can we even use these...?”

“I just have to change myself and we’ll be good.”

My solution was to make a Stickiness Resistance skill. C-Grade would cost 400 LP, B-Grade 600, A-Grade 1,000, and S-Grade 1,500. It seemed like it could come in handy against spider monsters and the like, so I bought the S-Grade version. Immediately, the silk balls got easier to use. They were hardly sticky at

all.

Fwip! Splat!

Now I could throw them with ease. I could even make use of my B-Grade Throwing skill again.

“Wow, that was great!” said Luna. “How did you manage it?”

“I gave myself S-Grade Stickiness Resistance. Now they’re just like normal balls.”

“Heh, you always figure something out, Sir Noir. We’ll be more than able to accomplish the request now.”

We just had to find the monkeys. We searched the forest, keeping our eyes peeled for surprise attacks. After about ten minutes, we discovered the corpses of several wild beasts. It looked like the corpses had been moved under trees and concealed with leaves. The monkeys were probably saving them for later. Monkeys were smart, and becoming monsters had only made them smarter.

Luna investigated the soft ground. “Footprints. A lot of them too. They look like monkey tracks.”

“Seems like a group of them. I’ll ask the Great Sage where they are.”

<231 yards to the north.> My head didn’t hurt yet, so I asked how many there were.

<Twelve.> More than I was expecting. Luna’s expression darkened when I told her. If these were just goblins, it wouldn’t have been an issue. But a highly intelligent and unfamiliar enemy could be dangerous in large numbers.

“I’d really prefer to take just *one* body back.”

“Yeah, not having to take them all out would be ideal. I guess it’ll depend on the situation.”

We decided to set up an ambush. Staying low, we crept through the forest, careful not to step on any fallen branches. When we finally reached our targets, we concealed ourselves behind some trees.

We’d found them. The hand monkeys were in the middle of a meal. Some of

them were gathered around the corpse of an animal, and some were eating fruit. Their arms were abnormally long—long enough to touch the ground when they stood up. They were about as tall as we were, with long fur and stocky physiques, kind of like orangutans. The main difference was their golden fur and red eyes. And their levels were all over the place—the highest was Level 80, and the lowest Level 20. They had skills like Agility, Tree Climbing, Throwing, Grip Strength, and Superhuman Strength, and they seemed skilled at close and mid-range combat. Pretty tough opponents.

“There are some differences between the individuals here, but they’re all strong.” I said. “Taking on twelve at once will be rough.”

“I guess our best choice will be to take out one and run, huh?” Luna said. “Maybe we should target that one over there?”

It had finished eating and was moving between the trees with its long arms. It looked like it was playing. It was only Level 32 and had mediocre skills.

We had a plan. It was time to put it into action. I aimed for the monkey, waited until it was moving between branches, and threw one of the silk balls.

“Eek?!”

The ball burst, gluing the monkey’s fingers to the branch. That felt amazing! The hand monkey started to panic, but the silk wouldn’t let go. I leapt from the shrub I was hiding in.

Pew! Pew!

I heard two gunshots behind me. The first one grazed the creature’s wrist, and the second ripped through its remaining flesh. The monkey fell from the branch, leaving its hand stuck behind.

“H-humans!”

Its comrades had noticed me. They could talk?! I ignored them, dashing toward the disabled hand monkey and thrusting my sword through its head. It flailed around a bit and died, and I quickly put its body in my Pocket Dimension. When I turned around— “You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

I was surrounded. These things were fast. They were on the ground and in the

trees around me, glaring.

“Kill them and eat them!”

“Eat them!”

“Die!”

A long arm swept for me. I ducked to dodge it.

“Gah?!”

The arm missed, but I felt something hit my shoulder. The ones in the trees were throwing fruit or nuts or something. I put up a Stone Wall, creating an obstacle between us. Of course, it was only a temporary solution, but almost right away, one of the monkeys on the ground went flying. Others soon followed it. The sound of heavy gunshots confirmed that Luna was backing me up.

“Run, Sir Noir! I’ll cover you.”

“Thanks a million.”

I sprinted toward her. The hand monkeys gave chase with murder in their eyes, but Luna’s magical firearm kept them at bay. Somehow, I reached her, and the two of us made our escape. As we ran, I turned around now and then to fire off a Stone Bullet. I didn’t land many, but the barrage slowed down their advance.

“Never...let you get away...”

“Revenge! Revenge!”

They sure were persistent. It was difficult to shake the monkeys, but they didn’t follow once we’d left the forest. Seemed they weren’t about to pick a fight outside their home turf. They were smart, and that made them scary.

“Haah, haah, they really didn’t want to give up...”

“They’ll probably remember us.”

It seemed likely, especially considering they could speak. It would probably be better to avoid the forest for a while.

“Were you injured earlier?” Luna asked.

“My shoulder just took a little hit.”

“Healing Shot!”

The pain receded and a pleasant feeling spread through my body. Luna’s Healing Shot really was powerful. I thanked her, and we returned to the guild, where we handed over the monkey corpse and explained what had happened to Lola.

“Was it strong?”

The other adventurers were curious. We figured it would be good to share what we’d learned. I explained our tactics and the skills we’d used against the monkeys. Since we’d drawn a decent crowd, I warned the lower-rank adventurers not to try it.

I was surprised to find that the compensation for the request was much more than I’d expected.

“Huh? You gave me 360,000 rels.”

“It’s a bonus from the guild for providing valuable information to our adventurers.”

I was grateful and gave Luna her 50 percent share.

“And the guild has one more thing for you,” said Lola.

Was this the thing she’d hinted at before?

“You’re currently a B-Rank adventurer,” she said. “To advance to A-Rank, you need to pass a special test.”

The adventuring system varied from kingdom to kingdom. Here, guilds could assign ranks up to B on their own terms, but anything above that required recognition from the government. They administered a test, and if you passed, you’d move up. The test was held only once every few months, and each guild put forward candidates from its pool of B-Rank adventurers.

“Odin would be happy to endorse you for the exam, if you’re interested. Of course, you’re more than welcome to refuse.”

Apparently, the test was happening soon.

“This is a real opportunity,” I said. “I’d be happy to take it.”

“I thought you would! I’d be happy to help you with the paperwork, Mr. Noir!”

Lola pulled out an application for me to sign and said she’d let me know when the schedule was settled.

“And I have something a little more personal for you. Please accept this.” She pulled a small bundle from under the counter and handed it to me.

“It’s soft. What is it?”

“Pajamas. A present from your managing receptionist to one of her hardest working adventurers.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to wear them.”

“Heh heh, there’s a secret present in there too!”

Lola punctuated the comment with a wink. Luna looked a little annoyed.

“You can give Sir Noir all the presents you like, but I’ve been working hard too, you know.”

“Oh, uh, I have something for you too, Luna.”

“Really?”

Lola was definitely lying. Her eyes moved around frantically, looking for something she could give Luna.

“H-here, it’s the pen I always use...”

“That’s not a present!”

“You caught me...”

Luna was visibly angry, but Lola and I worked together to make her feel better. It didn’t take long to snap her out of it.

That evening, still in my underwear after a bath, I sat down to open Lola’s present. It was an expensive-looking pajama set with a letter on top. I started with the letter.

Dear Mr. Noir,

Thank you for always completing your requests. Because of your hard work, I'm probably going to take the top spot this month too. I know this isn't much, but please accept this gift as a token of my gratitude. I hope you'll wear them.

For my dearest adventurer.

P.S. Keep the thing underneath the pajamas a secret, okay? I'm told that, in another land, it's customary to give gentlemen something you've worn. (So embarrassing!) "I wonder what it is."

I lifted the pajamas up and couldn't believe what I saw.

"P-p-panties..."

As confused as I was about the women's undergarment, I found myself reaching to pick them up. They were light purple and pretty sexy. Going by what Lola had said in the letter... Had she worn these, at least once? I flushed, and at that precise moment, my door opened.

"Brother dearest, I was thinking, it's been ages since you rested your head on my la—"

I wondered what was going through my little sister's head when she saw me holding up a pair of women's undergarments, inspecting them. For a moment, her expression blanked.

"Are those...mine?" she asked in a chilling voice.

"O-of course not! Not a chance!"

"What is wrong with you?!" she snapped. "Throw those away this instant!"

Why are you mad at me?!

"Noir, my boy, Olivia called my beard lame—wait, what's going on?"

My father was already running his mouth when he saw what was going on. And to make matters worse, Olivia was there too.

"Noir, your dad's facial hair looks like—oooh, are those mine?"

"They are *not*!"

"You don't have to hide it~! Don't worry, all boys your age get curious. Ah ha ha ha ha ha!"

First off, how could she not even recognize her own underwear?

To make matters *even worse* Tigerson appeared, turning the situation into total chaos. He couldn't actually fit into my room, so he just looked in through the door.

<*Noir, Olivia insists that I change my name to Lionson.*> “W-well, she does kind of have a point, but I think Tigerson is fine.”

<*Also, those undergarments are a bit small for your frame, Noir.*> Tigerson's misinterpretation cut the deepest...

Chapter 5:

Hunting for Items

THE NEXT MORNING, I FOUND MYSELF at the inn where Mira was staying. It was time to take her to meet the real estate agent, Mr. Domado. When I asked the front desk where to find her, they told me she was in the backyard with her father.

I slipped through the lobby and opened the door. Mira was outside, holding a burlap bag open and pointing it at a boulder. It was perplexing, but before I could even formulate a question, water sprayed from the mouth of the bag. It had a lot of force, but it wasn't particularly destructive. Once the water ran out, the boulder was wet but unharmed.

"Huh? That's it?"

Mira frowned. On the other hand, the dapper fellow standing next to her was all smiles. His thick red hair was parted in the center, and he looked to be in his late thirties, his aura thoroughly that of a mature man. His skin was flawless and his features elegant. He kind of looked like Mira.

"I'm impressed," he said. "That was quite a bit of water pressure."

"Daddy, are you stupid? It only works thirty times. You're seriously going to shell out three hundred grand for this?"

"Oh, Mira, you're still so young. You see, men are always pursuing their dreams. If a man forgets his adventurous spirit, he'll shrivel up into nothing."

I had to agree, but Mira seemed tired of it. Given their conversation, he had to be her father. Come to think of it, he kinda reminded me of *my* father. I surreptitiously used Discerning Eye on him. His name was Stoke Santage. He was only Level 30, but he had an Enchanted Item Perception skill.

"Oh, Noir, is that you?" Mira asked. "Are you here to see me?"

"Hello. About the real estate agent, remember?"

"Oh! Right! We did talk about that."

“He’d like to meet you,” I said. “So I thought I’d take you to see him. That’s your dad, right? Pleased to meet you, sir.”

I introduced myself, and Mr. Stoke responded with cheer. He seemed interested in the real estate agent too.

“Noir, is this the agent helping us find somewhere for our weapons shop?”

“Yeah, apparently he’s got a few vacant lots that would be a good fit.”

“That’s just perfect! I would love to join you.”

And I was happy to have him. The three of us left the inn and walked to meet Mr. Domado. Mr. Stoke didn’t ask many questions, but he told me all about his dreams of expanding the store. He boasted about how the Santage Weapons shop was the biggest in his country. They dealt primarily in offensive weapons, but they also carried armor and items—although they couldn’t really compete with specialty shops in that respect. Business was going well, but he wanted to expand their reach to other lands.

“Weapons and armor shops have a variety of policies,” he said. “Efficiency is a big priority in our kingdom. It ensures high profits from each weapon. But it means that it’s common to take low-cost items and add a little decoration to boost the price.”

I supposed that made a good first impression on buyers, but it was all just for show. The ornamentation didn’t affect the item’s functionality, and the base product was probably of inferior quality.

“A soldier wouldn’t be happy if their sword broke in combat,” Mr. Stoke said. “Though being unhappy would be the *least* of their worries. Once you’ve lost your life, you can never get it back. That’s why the Santage family decided to prioritize high-quality items.”

Mr. Stoke’s grandfather had founded the shop, and he’d decided to do things differently back when they only had one storefront. A single good experience with their products meant repeat customers, and eventually more and more people started buying from them. Their strategy netted them small but consistent profits. This seemed like it could be useful for my own business.

“Before long, we were the top weapons supplier in the kingdom. As I always

say: your weapon is half your soul!”

That sure was passionate, and kinda cool too. Or rather, it would have been if we weren’t in the middle of the street.

“Daddy, stop it! You’re embarrassing me. You’re almost forty, for goodness’ sake.”

“Dreams have no expiration date! That kind of thinking only inhibits you. There’s no point thinking about how you *should* act or what you *should* do at your age. That kind of ‘common sense’ crushes innovation! You’re punching over your weight class when you’re barely out of diapers, little girl!”

“All right, already, I’m in the wrong.”

Mira’s father was quite the character. She seemed used to managing him, so maybe she was trying to keep him from going overboard. Still, I decided to take note of his little speech.

Once we met up with Mr. Domado, Mira and I weren’t really needed. Mr. Stoke was the one buying, after all. It was probably better to let the adults handle things.

“Let’s go hang out somewhere.”

So Mira and I wandered around town. As we went, I asked her about that water bag thing from earlier.

“Oh, that. Daddy bought it from some weird merchant. Not only does it have a hard cap on uses, it’s *extremely* weaksauce.”

“I bet you guys have a lot of connections,” I said. “I’ve actually been trying to accumulate weapons lately.”

“Well, I’m not gonna say I can’t help you, but I have some conditions. I wanna know why you’re collecting and what your powers are.”

It must have seemed unfair that I knew her secrets when she didn’t know mine. It felt risky telling someone I’d only known for a few days, but the potential advantages outweighed the risks. Getting close to the Santage family meant more opportunities to earn LP.

“My abilities are unique...”

I gave her a rough outline, and Mira's eyes went wide.

"It's a little hard to believe," she said. "No offense, but can I test you?"

"Sure, what kind of test?"

"Look at this item."

A green stone appeared in her hand. "It's an enchanted stone that lets you use Wind Strike," she explained. "But it has a fixed number of uses, just like that bag."

I took a look.

Wind Strike Stone

Grade C

Skills: Wind Strike x1

It might have had more uses once, but now there was only one left before it broke.

“Can you increase the number of Wind Strikes?” Mira asked.

Bumping it up to two was only 300 LP.

“Like I said before, I can if I expend LP,” I said.

“I’ll pay you back in weapons, so why don’t you try it?”

“All right...done.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Mira used the rock in the empty street, which was rocked with a Wind Strike. But the stone stayed whole.

“Wow, it really didn’t break!”

“It will if you use it again though.”

“Holy crap, that’s incredible! Boost the number of uses again please! I’ll definitely give you weapons.”

Adding more uses was trivial as long as I had the LP, so I agreed. Mira had all manner of weapons in her mobile armory. She pulled out all sorts of things—from blades to hammers to bows. I converted them all and earned several thousand LP when I did. After that, I increased the number of Wind Strikes in the stone to ten, and still had LP left over.

“You can keep whatever’s left,” Mira said. “Think of it as a present from a friend.”

“I appreciate it. I’m currently aiming for a hundred thousand.”

“It’s crazy. I mean you can earn LP from food, or even sexual stuff... Wait, don’t tell me that’s what you’ve been doing?”

“Oh, what’s going on over there?”

I dodged the question and headed into the crowd. I couldn't bring myself to tell Mira that I'd just been gifted a pair of panties. Instead, I walked toward a ring where two young men were punching each other.

Upon closer inspection, the fight was extremely one-sided. Even when the other guy had an opening, he didn't take it. A wooden sign on the ring read, "Hit Me If You Can: 3,000 rels/minute." Now it made sense. The long-haired man was taking money to dodge attacks. If his opponent managed to land a hit, that was basically no one's fault but his own.

"Huh, he's not bad." Mira sounded bored, holding a finger to her cheek.

Long Hair had skills for forward, side, and back steps, along with Dynamic Visual Acuity. The customer in the ring didn't look like an amateur—he was moving like someone trained in martial arts. But Long Hair didn't have even a single injury on his face. He clearly had both ability and experience.

"Three grand a minute is way too high," Mira complained. "Who would pay for that? Oh, wait, if you land two hits, you get a Wand of Memory."

It was written in very small text on the sign. In an instant, Mira's expression flipped from disinterest to fiery passion.

"Okay! Hello! Excuuuse me! I'm next! Me!"

"Is that a good item or something?" I asked.

"It's only temporary, but it improves your memory. It's more than a little rare."

"I want it too. If you fail, I'll take a shot at him."

"Heh, that's a big *if*," Mira said proudly, puffing out her chest.

The man's current opponent had failed to land even a single hit.

"Any other takers?" he asked.

"Me! Me! Me!" Mira shouted.

"It's three thousand rels for a minute."

"I don't care about that—show me the wand."

"Oh, here it is."

One of Long Hair's companions brought out a bag and pulled out a rod from inside. Mira immediately appraised it. The wand was made of wood and roughly a foot long. At a glance, it looked like the kind of item you'd find just about anywhere. I used my Discerning Eye to be sure, but it was definitely genuine. Mira came to the same conclusion and jumped into the ring. She was strong, but she didn't have any combat skills.

"Here goes my first hit!" Mira wound up and dashed forward. She was shockingly fast!

"Huh?!"

Long Hair had the same reaction as me. He frantically tried to get away, but she nailed him in the chin with the heel of her hand, knocking him down.

"What's that? Twenty seconds? Plenty of time. Feel free to dodge one of my attacks."

"Ngh."

Long Hair got back up immediately and fell back into his stance. Mira came for him again. She was moving abnormally fast. He tried to evade her, but she was up in his business in no time. He shifted from side to side to keep her on her toes, but Mira watched him closely. She raised her left arm. Long Hair flinched and froze. In a matter of moments, she finished him off with a right hook. Long Hair spun as he fell. Mira had landed her two hits.

"Yay! That Wand of Memory is mine."

Mira took the wand from the man's companion and raised it over her head joyfully.

Meanwhile, I was looking down. Down at her shoes. They had skills on them! Mercury's Sandals and Light Weight. I couldn't believe my eyes, so I checked her clothes too. They all had various elemental resistances. Most were B-Grade, but their defensive qualities had been carefully considered. I shouldn't have expected anything else from the daughter of her country's foremost weapons dealer. *Of course* she had all sorts of enchanted items at her disposal—just like that ball she'd use to take out those treasure hunters.

"Heh heh heh~! I'm so happy I found you~!"

Mira sounded almost like a lecherous old man as she rubbed the wand against her cheek.

“You know, I met a baron recently who loves enchanted items,” I said. “He’s a collector. Are you into that sort of thing too?”

“I like collecting, but I find things like this to *use* them. I’ve always been like that. I mean, doesn’t it just give you the chills? There are enchanted items that can give you *incredible* skills. Plus, items will never betray you,” Mira said, her voice changing. “They’re not like those slutty girls who call you their bestie and then drop you the instant they get a boyfriend! Enchanted items are always on my side!”

Sounded like she’d had it rough. I didn’t say anything. I just gave her a gentle smile.

It was finally time to cross blades with Schuren’s parents. Schuren, Luna, and I all sat on a couch in his house, waiting for them to arrive. Mirenka was there too, preparing for guests.

Schuren explained that his family found formalities annoying. At first, his parents had been understanding about his bachelorhood, but for some reason, they’d pestered him about it more over the last few years.

“Do you have any idea why?”

“Not a clue. I haven’t changed, as far as I can tell. Mirenka, do you think I’ve changed?”

“No, my lord. Your zeal for enchanted items is still the same. Admittedly, it wouldn’t be a bad thing if you took more interest in people.”

“Uhh...I’ve been trying.”

Mirenka had been working for him for several years and seemed responsible for his personal needs.

“I’ve told Mirenka where I keep my stash of enchanted items,” said Schuren. “So that she can sell them off if something happens to me.”

“Sell them? I thought you wanted to keep them.”

“As long as I’m alive, yes. But these items have a purpose. I’d rather they’re sold to someone who’ll make use of them, not just leave them in a box to rot. I owe that much to society.”

I had to imagine that the enchanted items themselves were happy to be in his possession.

Just then, we heard the front door open. Mirenka headed off, and a short while later, she came back with a man and woman. We all stood to greet them. Schuren’s parents didn’t look that old at all. They seemed very youthful, standing straight as a pair of arrows. You’d never have guessed they were more than fifty.

“Hmph, forty-six days since we last met.”

“No, honey, it’s been forty-seven.”

They had something of a unique tempo to their conversation. The man was tall, with white hair and an immaculately manicured beard. His veins bulged over taut muscles. This guy was so cool. His wife, on the other hand, had the air of a refined noblewoman. Her hair was white too, but there wasn’t a single wrinkle on her face. She was slender and nowhere near as intimidating as her husband.

“So these are the two people you plan to use to fight us?” the man asked.

“I wish you wouldn’t phrase it like that. I’m not ‘using’ anyone. I might love enchanted items, but I *do* understand that people aren’t things. I’m sorry, Noir, Luna, my father has never been particularly good with words.”

Luna shook her head, telling him not to worry about it. “My name is Luna Heela,” she said. “I work as a cleric and adventurer.”

“Intriguing...”

“My, what a lovely girl you are.”

Schuren’s parents seemed to come away with a good impression of her. I certainly did. I was always so nervous in front of high-ranked nobles; I was much more comfortable around commoners. All eyes were on me as I hoarsely introduced myself.

“I’m Noir, the third son of the Stardia family. I’m a student at the Hero Academy and an adventurer. My father’s a baronet.”

“Hmm, the Stardia family you say?”

“Father, these two saved Marie, the duke’s daughter,” Schuren said, looking smug.

His parents were utterly stunned. What an incredible reaction.

“Sch-Schuren, you’ve brought some truly incredible people...”

“We’re ready whenever you are.”

“Very well. Let’s go outside.”

Seemingly provoked by the comment, Schuren’s parents were ready to get started. We all moved out into the yard. The two of them tested the turf with their swords—checking to see if there were any traps. After that, servants outfitted their master with armor. It was dazzling silver plate mail that must have been polished regularly. It positively gleamed.

“Seems like my armor’s in tip-top shape. Shall we start this?”

“Fine by us.”

I had just shy of 5,000 LP. The wife had her abilities Concealed so I couldn’t tell what they were, but her husband...

Name: Gandez Trower

Age: 65

Species: Human

Level: 199

Occupation: Fencing Instructor

Skills: Iwasaku School Swordsmanship (Grade A); Power Slash; Earth Slash; Thrust; Stamina Up; Martial Arts (Grade A); Physical Defense (Grade C); Poison Resistance (Grade C); Heat Resistance (Grade B)

S-so powerful...

His skill set was pretty specialized, and he didn't have any obvious weaknesses either. I'd heard he'd opened a fencing school for common children, but I hadn't realized he was quite *this* skilled. His armor wasn't anything special, so it was probably just to increase his defense. My guess was that Iwasaku School Swordsmanship was some kind of famous sword-fighting style.

"Battle can begin at a moment's notice," Gandez boomed. "So hurry up and take your stance."

"The husband is specialized in swordsmanship," I whispered to Luna, raising my sword. "I don't know about the wife."

"My intuition is telling me that she's a magic user. I'll keep her busy and back you up when I see an opportunity."

I agreed and faced my opponent. Suddenly, my entire field of vision was filled by Gandez charging in with his blade.

"What?!" I barely stepped out of the way in time.

"That was underhanded, father!" Schuren shouted.

"Silence! I warned him that battle could begin at any moment!"

"Counterattacks can too," I said, performing a Power Slash.

The move increased the speed of my blade and attack power, but the swing was large and tiring. Our blades screeched together as Gandez blocked, but he couldn't dampen enough of the force and tumbled back. Still, he got up immediately and made no attempt to retreat.

"I like you!" he said. "Now you will see a real swordsman's technique!"

He came at me in a mad rush, but that was just what I was hoping for. I Bestowed the skill +5lbs—not onto him, but his plate mail. Between his significant stamina and heightened emotional state, he didn't seem to notice.

I'd never seen this sword technique before, so I focused on dodging—making full use of my Improved Lunge, Side Step, and Back Step. They had to be my three most-used skills by that point.

"Struggling already?" Gandez asked. "You haven't even seen the essence of

the Iwasaku School yet.”

He raised his sword to the sky, then swung down in one glorious motion. I dodged, but his blade hit the ground, sending earth flying.

“Bleh...”

Dirt got in my eyes and mouth. Gandez seemed entirely unconcerned and repeated the motion over and over, opening a hole in the ground. That was likely his Earth Slash skill. I wasn’t going to spend the entire fight on the defensive, so I added another ten pounds to his armor, for a total of fifteen.

“You can run, but you can’t escape my blade!”

Not yet. I had to be patient. I added another fifteen pounds.

“Ah...”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! You have nowhere to run now!”

The yard was in a bad state. If I tried to step back, I’d probably stumble, and Gandez was standing triumphant in front of me.

“This plate mail protects me from my own technique,” he said. “Preparation... invites...victory...”

“Oh, it’s not over yet,” I said. “If anyone’s getting exhausted, it’s you.”

His shoulders heaved as he struggled for breath. But then, of course he was tired, he was charging around with an extra thirty pounds of weight.

“Haah, haah... H-how strange. Why is my armor so heavy...? Noir, you didn’t —”

“I sure did. But the ability in question is a secret.”

“I knew it,” he said. “Very well, let us settle this with one last decisive stri—?!”

With a loud, heavy thump, Gandez fell dramatically to the ground. Luna had hit him in the foot with an Impact Shot.

“Shame on you,” she said. “For forgetting there are two of us in this fight.”

She was too perfect!

I stepped toward Gandez and swung to knock his sword away.

“This isn’t a battle to the death,” I said. “You’ve lost your sword. Give up.”

“I hate to admit it...but you’ve got me.”

Thankfully, Gandez admitted defeat.

“So, Father, how does it feel to lose?” Schuren called from where he was watching. “You grew over reliant on your armor, trusting it more than the swordsmanship you’ve spent so much time cultivating. No wonder you lost.”

“Where do you get off?! You didn’t even *do* anything!”

They both had a point, but this was no time to get caught up in a father-son squabble. I turned toward the other fight going on in the yard. At a glance, Luna seemed to have the advantage. The wife had lost her elegance—her clothes were in tatters, and she looked exhausted. I moved in front of her, keeping clear of Luna’s line of fire.

“Sir Noir, she’s adept at water magic.”

That explained why the ground was wet.

“You needn’t worry,” she said. “I won’t use any more water magic.”

She raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. I supposed she was already at a disadvantage when I joined the fray.

“Mother, why?” Schuren exclaimed. “If you don’t give up, surely you can turn things around!”

“I don’t want to hear comments from the peanut gallery!”

Once again, they both had a point. Maybe I should start calling them the Trower Family of Sensible Points.... Although only to myself.

The fight had concluded, and we were victorious. Luna and I high-fived. Schuren seemed to want in too, so of course we indulged him. Gandez and his wife had made an excellent show of sportsmanship, and they were true to their word.

“Schuren, a promise is a promise. We’ll never insist that you marry.”

“Indeed. We were simply jealous of all the adorable grandchildren entering

our social circle. Everyone says that grandchildren are so much sweeter than your own children.”

That sounded familiar. I was probably too young to understand. I mean, I didn’t have children. I hadn’t even...you know...tried to make them yet...

At any rate, Schuren couldn’t stop smiling. “I’m glad you understand. My life is happy just as it is, with my house and my servants.”

He gazed at Mirenka and his estate with profound love. I was glad that we had helped him hold onto his calm, enjoyable life. I felt a little proud for contributing to that.

And that closed the book on that incident, or so I thought—until someone ruptured the peaceful moment.

“Not long ago, Lord Schuren came to me for medical treatment,” said Luna, looking grim. “He complained that his parents were pestering him to marry, and that they were very particular about his future wife’s social standing. Namely, that a maid was out of the question.”

Everyone looked at Schuren.

“Umm, well, I’ll admit I did say that. Father flew into a rage when I even mentioned the idea.”

“Of course I did,” said Gandez. “Marrying a commoner would bring shame on the family. Your bride needs to come from a good family, at the very least.”

“You teach commoners how to wield a sword,” said Schuren. “But you’re just a bigot and a hypocrite, Father! A filthy hypocrite!”

“H-how dare—! I’m just thinking of your honor. High society is cruel.”

He was right, nobles cared a lot about appearances. They were always trying to outdo each other to assert dominance, and I was always on the losing end of those struggles. If Schuren married someone without a pedigree, people would definitely belittle him. Best-case scenario, they would gossip about it relentlessly.

Just as the two of them were about to start fighting, a loud gunshot rang out. Luna looked between them with a collected expression.

“What I’m trying to say is that I think Lord Schuren is already in love. But he decided to give up the prospect of ever marrying her, for her own sake.” Luna turned to look pointedly at Mirenka. “Isn’t that right?”

“Um, I, uh, I’m just a servant. I couldn’t...”

Mirenka was visibly shaken. Schuren went silent and looked down at the ground. This was a mess.

“I think you should be honest about your feelings,” I said.

“You’re probably right,” he said. “Ms. Luna is correct. Mirenka and I have been in love for several years, but eloping would only destroy our lives. So we decided to keep things the way they are.”

No one said a word. I hadn’t expected such a serious development. I’d thought that, when we won, we’d get a happy ending.

“Sometimes I wonder why people get married,” said Luna. “It seems like such a silly thing to get hung up on, but I think we want some tangible proof that our love endures in this uncertain world.”

I didn’t know much about marriage and the like, so it was hard for me to fully understand what she was saying, but her words seemed to resonate with Schuren.

“When you put it like that, I guess I have no choice but to risk it. Even if it means being disowned.”

He went to Mirenka and took her hands. His mother clapped.

“I approve. When you bear my grandchildren, I’ll come to visit every day.”

“I’ll come visit from time to time too,” I said.

“Me too,” Luna agreed. “I’m sure Mr. Gandez will come around when he gets to play with his grandchildren.”

“You’re monsters!” Gandez complained. “The lot of you! I... Even I... Whatever. Do as you please.”

Finally, he relented. Schuren’s eyes went wide.

“I don’t believe it. My thick-skulled father of all people...”

“You’re an adult, and you’ve lived your own life thus far. It’s up to you to decide.”

Schuren and Mirenka looked at each other, nodded, and kissed. That looked like their answer.

Now for the moment I was waiting for. We went to Schuren’s room, and I accepted my prize: the item with the Enchanted Item Perception skill. The path to obtain it had some twists and turns, but I got what I wanted in the end.

“This is the Bell of Perception,” said Schuren. “It rings in the presence of enchanted items. The closer you are to the item, the louder it will ring. However, you have to be touching the bell for it to work.”

So you couldn’t just keep it in your bag to alert you when something was nearby. That was probably better than it going off constantly. If one of your party members had an enchanted item, it would be ringing all the time. That would be a real pain.

“There’s one other thing to keep in mind,” said Schuren. “It will react to *any* enchanted item. So you’re most likely to acquire things with rather lackluster skills.”

Exceptionally useful items were rare, so the reverse was also true: average ones were quite common. It was entirely possible that the vast majority of your finds would be C-Grade.

“How much do you want for it?” I asked.

“I guess that was the deal, wasn’t it? How about this?” Schuren held up a finger.

“One hundred thousand? No, one million rels?”

“No. Just one. One of the lowest denomination coins you have to hand.”

“You’re incredible, Mr. Schuren!”

And just like that, I got my hands on an extremely valuable item.

I’m going to treasure it!

I said goodbye to Schuren and Luna, then went to test it out. I put my two-

edged blade away in my Pocket Dimension so that it wouldn't trigger the skill, and I picked up the bell.

Brrring! Brring!

Ooh! It reacted! There was a decent bit of foot traffic in the street, so I went searching for the item it had picked up on. It seemed to be reacting to something from one of the vendors. I tucked the bell away in my pocket and investigated the wares. They were magic stones, but they were all C-Grade and ludicrously expensive. Who even bought these?

I took out the bell again and started walking around town. It rang frequently. Usually when someone walked past me, or when I walked past a store.

"Maybe this could use an upgrade."

I took the sentence, "senses enchanted items," from the item's description and opened Editor. Adjusting it to "senses enchanted items of B-Grade or higher" would only cost 800 LP, so I didn't think twice. Now I wouldn't be disappointed by any more C-Grade finds.

I wandered around with the new and improved Bell of Perception until it rang in front of a particular shop. Only it wasn't the sort of place that sold enchanted items. Rather, it sold the sorts of products that housewives delighted in. I went in to check it out. The bell had definitely reacted to something, but it didn't seem to be any of the products on display. I approached one of the clerks behind the counters, and the bell rang out loudly.

"Um, excuse me," I said. "You wouldn't happen to be carrying some kind of enchanted item, would you?"

The forty-something woman looked taken aback. "Huh? How did you know?"

"I have something that senses enchanted items. It reacted to something over here."

"One moment."

She went into the back and came back with a ring. She set it down on the counter.

"My husband found it while cleaning the house yesterday. His late

grandfather had hidden it. I'm told he was fond of enchanted items..."

It was a little rusty, but otherwise it looked normal.

Ring of Power

Grade B

Skills: Superhuman Strength; Grip Strength (Grade A)

It was quite a find. I got her permission to touch it and found...it was worth 4,200 LP. I definitely wanted it, if the price was right. The woman put her hand on her chin, seemingly frustrated with the ring.

“We don’t sell jewelry here, so I’m really not sure what to do with it. I was thinking about just putting it out on the shelves anyway.”

“How much would you sell it for?”

“Ten, maybe twenty thousand? I’m not even sure that it’s enchanted.”

“Would you take fifty thousand? I’m a student at the Hero Academy and I’m collecting enchanted items.”

“Oh, my, you must be brilliant.”

She seemed genuinely impressed. I supposed the Hero Academy’s name carried weight. She was in a good mood and liked the idea of making fifty thousand rels.

“I’d feel bad taking so much from such a bright student,” she said.

“I also work as an adventurer, so I have some income. Please, don’t worry.”

“Really? I still feel kinda bad about it.”

If anything, fifty thousand was too cheap. Eventually, she accepted my offer. I left the store and immediately converted the Ring of Power. I’d used a bit of LP today, so it was good to refill my reserves.

“Yeah, worth it.”

Using the Bell of Perception to find enchanted items was working out nicely. I loitered around town until it started to get dark. I was about to head home when I made an incredible discovery: Mira, talking to someone on a side street.

“Why don’t you say that again and see what happens?!”

She was threatening a man and woman. They looked like a couple. The

woman seemed especially angry, her tone cruel and pointed. I could also hear a little girl crying. What was going on? Whatever it was, Mira was cocky as ever.

“What part of ‘I’m not repeating myself’ do you not understand?” she asked. “Maybe you should get your head checked.”

“Screw you! Do you have any idea what my boyfriend was doing?!”

“Why the hell would I? Also, wow, your boyfriend was doing it? Talk about embarrassing. You basically just admitted that you’re completely incompetent.”

“Why you—”

“Waaah, Mommy!”

As they bickered, the boyfriend cracked his knuckles menacingly and the little girl cried. If I didn’t intervene, I sensed this could get serious.

“Hey, what’s the problem here?” I asked.

“Noir! Listen, these jerks were telling this girl she was a ‘nuisance.’”

“Who is she?” I asked.

“She got lost. I was helping her find her mother.”

Now it made sense. The couple must have complained, then Mira bit back at them, and well, now here we were. I was just thinking about how I’d have to delay dinner to handle this when the boyfriend grabbed me by the collar.

“You her boyfriend? You better apologize for your girl bein’ so rude. I’m an adventurer, you know. B-Rank.”

Strange, considering his low level and utter lack of skills. Of course, it wasn’t impossible for someone like him to be quite strong, but he wasn’t.

“What a coincidence,” I said. “I’m B-Rank too.”

“Huh? What?”

I grabbed his hands and twisted them.

The girlfriend wasn’t watching. “Oh, yeah, sure! You look like a total scrub.”

“W-wait,” said the man. “He’s not—aaaahh!”

I twisted harder. The man’s body convulsed, frantically trying to escape the

pain. He fell to his knees.

“Wanna test your strength?” I asked. “You know, since we’re the same rank?”

“S-sorry, I’m sorry, please, let me go...”

“Excuuuuse me?” said Mira. “You’re the one who started this.”

“She’s right,” I said. “And you’re not B-Rank, you’re probably not even an adventurer.”

I got the feeling he was probably lying to his girlfriend too, so I figured I’d mention it. The girlfriend whipped around and left when I did, saying she was done with this. Mira chased after her at top speed.

“You’re not getting away that easy! You’re gonna apologize to her.”

“Excuse me...?” the girlfriend sneered.

“I should probably mention this,” I said. “She’s *way* stronger than me.”

The woman’s face froze, and she promptly apologized to the little girl. It was probably just for show, but Mira got what she wanted.

I stroked the little girl’s head as she cried. “Do you know your full name?” I asked tenderly.

Eventually, she managed to tell me between sobs. I asked the Great Sage where her mother was.

<*One hundred and twenty yards to the east.*> I took the girl by the hand and led her to her mother. When we got close, she ran over, and her mother thanked us. Another happy ending.

Mira just stared at me, agape. “Dang, I think you might be one of the most competent men I’ve ever met.”

“I’m honored, m’lady,” I joked.

Mira linked arms with me. “All right! Let’s grab a drink! My treat!”

“Drink? You mean alcohol?”

“Natch. We’re sixteen, so it’s legal here too. Let’s go!”

Only...I wasn’t much of a drinker.

“Who goes there?” came a voice from behind us, dripping with hatred. “And who’s that young maiden?”

We turned around. It was Emma. The expression on her face almost made her look possessed.

“Wh-whoa!” I said. “Wh-wh-what’s wrong, Emma?”

“Don’t you ‘wh-wh-what’s wrong, Emma?’ me! Who is she?! Have you no shame?!”

“Oh, uhh, it’s a long story.”

I introduced Mira and explained how we met. Emma scowled the whole time. Mira tried to lighten the mood and offered her hand.

“I think bein’ a friend of a friend’s a great way to meet someone new, don’t you? Nice to meetcha.”

“I’m not so quick to make friends...unlike Noir here,” Emma declared, turning down the handshake. “I don’t trust you yet.”

I was afraid that Emma was about to explode, but uncharacteristically, Mira pulled back.

“Can’t blame you,” she said. “And I respect that. Why don’t you join us for a drink?”

Emma agreed, although she wasn’t much of a drinker either. I’d have to make sure neither of us overdid it.

The bar was bustling, but then, bars in town always were—no matter what day of the week. Of course, there were adventurers and soldiers in here, but there were also normal people enjoying a drink in preparation for another day’s work. For all those drinking their troubles away, there were plenty drinking just for fun.

We sat down around a table, and Mira shouted for a server to bring ale and wine, along with some food and snacks. She might have been in a foreign country, but she seemed totally at home. She was having fun and never even looked at the prices on the menu. Of course she didn’t. Money was no object to

a merchant's daughter.

"What's with you two?" she asked. "You sure got quiet."

"We don't really spend much time in bars like this."

"Really? But booze is great. What's more fun than getting hammered, throwing down with other drunks, and beating their asses?!"

That...was probably the *worst* reason to drink. But since we were here, I figured I might as well indulge a little. As we picked at the snacks, drank, and talked about our lives, I started feeling mellow and a little light-headed. It made Emma open up too. She'd been extremely guarded before, but now she relaxed and even laughed along with Mira.

"Heh, I guess drinking is pretty great after all."

Emma's red cheeks made her look so cute, and she was so unsteady that one push would probably have knocked her over. I offered her my shoulder, and she put her head on it.

"So you're *not* dating, huh?" Mira asked. "Maybe I should date you, Noir."

Did my feelings not factor into this?

"I'm not letting you date her," Emma snapped. "She could be a total psycho for all we know!"

"Let's make it a competition," said Mira. "If I win, I get to date Noir. If you win, I'll give you a powerful weapon."

Mira seemed a little drunk. Admittedly, the prospect of acquiring another weapon was enticing. I opened my mouth to take her up on the offer, but I didn't get the chance.

"Bring it on!" Emma shouted.

Mira snickered. "I don't mind tangoing with the both of you at once. After all, I *am* strong."

We didn't have much chance of winning otherwise, so we took her up on that.

Mira announced loudly that we were having a drinking contest and asked that the servers keep the tankards coming. She'd attracted a lot of attention, and

people began to crowd around our table. Mira seemed to enjoy being the center of attention.

“You ready?” she asked. “Let’s get started. Here’s drink number one!”

She held a wooden mug of ale. There was something deeply threatening about the way she chugged it. It might as well have been water...

On our team, Emma went first. She drank her first helping, undaunted. But while Mira seemed almost unaffected, Emma’s face was bright red, and her eyes were vacant.

“Let’s switch,” I said. “I’ll do the next one.”

“Nooooo! It’s a competishun! I’m not gonna loosh...”

I, uh, I think you have the air of someone who’s already lost!

Still, it was time for round two.

“You remind me of an old friend of mine,” said Mira. “Yeah, she was just like you...”

She glared at Emma, eyes full of hatred. What was going on here? She finished her second drink and slammed the mug down on the table.

“She had the kind of body, face, and personality that made her popular with boys. Then she picked her *stupid boyfriend* over her best friend!”

Oof. She’d had some friend drama in the past. It was probably best to avoid talking about it.

“You listening?!” Mira demanded.

“Eeek!”

Emma was already past her limit. She’d started sticking her tongue out and flashing peace signs.

“Woow, this feels kinda goood...”

“Emma!” I protested. “I never wanted to see you humiliated like this! I’m sorry... I’m so sorry. I was too weak to protect you...”

“I’m feelin’ kinda tingly~! Yaaay, Noir, are you watching?”

Those were her last words before she fell. Fell asleep, that is.

Thank you for trying so hard, Emma. I'll pick up where you left off.

I downed my third drink, resolved to see this through. The room started to spin, and I saw fireworks whenever I turned my head. I was getting drunk even faster than Emma. At this rate, I wouldn't make it. I excused myself to go to the restroom, but the second I stood up, I tripped and fell on top of Mira.

"Excuse me," she said. "Don't put your face in my boobs."

"Oh, sorry..."

She smelled really nice. I tried to push her away, but I ended up groping her.

"Eek! Y-you did that on purpose."

"Sooooorry, I didn't mean to, I swear."

I had no strength left as I stumbled to the bathroom. I slapped my cheeks to clear my thoughts. If I couldn't win a drinking competition on my own, I figured I might as well make a skill.

Wait... Where had all that LP come from? I'd had about 9,000 when we arrived, but now it was over 10,000. Then I remembered my "encounter" with Mira just then.

Hey, look at that. I can earn LP even when I'm drunk!

I made myself the skill Heavy Drinker. It only cost 30 LP. Its effects weren't exactly obvious, but I *did* feel different once I had it. My mind was clearer, the gross feeling in my chest disappeared, and I was much steadier on my feet.

"That worked well. Now I can keep fighting!"

I returned to my seat and Mira cackled. "Wow, running straight to the toilet after you cop a feel, huh? Whatever were you doing in there?"

"Look, I'm sorry about that. Forget about the me you saw a few minutes ago. I'm raring to go now."

"I like it! Let's drink ourselves under the table!"

I finished my fourth drink and was still totally fine. Drinks five, six, seven, and eight were much the same. I was still good by drink nine, but Mira was having

trouble focusing. By drink ten, I hardly felt anything. Mira, on the other hand, was drooling uncontrollably.

“Wowieeee, you sure are...strongk...”

After drink eleven, Mira’s eyes rolled back in her head. She flashed peace signs with both hands.

“Yaaay, is everybody watching?”

Maybe there was some kind of rule at this establishment where women had to flash double peace signs when they were drunk? Either way, Mira had exhausted all her energy. She fell flat on the table and stopped moving.

“Well, I’m glad I won, but I don’t think I’m getting that weapon any time soon.”

I had to get them both home. I was trying to work out how to carry them when Mira’s father showed up.

“Mr. Stoke, over here.”

“Oh, there you are! Mira wasn’t at the inn, so I came looking for her.”

He wasn’t shocked to see her like this. He was seemingly used to her drinking, and I guessed this sort of thing happened a lot. Apparently, she held so many drinking contests back home that some people walked the other way as soon as they saw her.

Mr. Stoke picked his daughter up. “Oh, yes, I should thank you, Noir. Because of your help, I’ve found a site for the shop. Now I can prepare for the opening.”

“I’d be happy to help out when I have time.”

“It’d be much appreciated,” he said. “As a thank you, I’ll give you my daughter’s first kiss!”

He was as funny as ever. I put Emma on my back and carried her through the dark streets. I could feel her warmth against my back. She’d really pushed herself tonight.

“The moon sure is pretty tonight, Emma.”

“Noooir, don’t let go. Don’t let go of meee!”

She was half-asleep, but she hugged me tight. Even if she hadn't, I wasn't about to let her go.

Chapter 6:

The King of the School Year Competition

FINALLY, THE DAY OF THE King of the School Year Competition arrived. The event wasn't just important for me; it was important for the whole Stardia family.

"Let us all support my dearest brother today," Alice said, looking meek. "We must ensure that he can reign victorious."

Everyone got up and stood in a line while I walked past and gave them all a hug—my mother, sister, Olivia, and Tigerson. It wasn't much, but LP was LP. It had been smart of Alice to suggest it. After I hugged Tigerson, my father bashfully held out his arms.

I smiled. "Oh, I'm good."

"Why?! You hugged Tigerson, even though you wouldn't get any LP from it!"

"It's an important bonding exercise."

"Oh, so you don't want to bond with me? I see how it is. Fine. It's not like I care..."

"Tell me, Father, did you bathe yesterday?" I asked pointedly.

My father whistled silently. From his reaction, he hadn't bathed in three days. And besides, exchanging passionate hugs with my father wasn't the most appealing proposition.

"I have no doubt that you'll win, Noir," Olivia said. "I mean, you are a disciple of the great Olivia, after all. Really, the only one you have to watch out for is Emma."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, how would I know? Just make sure you don't lose your wits to Emma's sex appeal!"

Yeah, I still had no idea what she was getting at. Maybe she'd given Emma some kind of advice. Either way, everyone came to the front door to see me off.

“My dear boy, if you win, we’ll have another way to promote the store,” my father said. “You understand how important this is, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I get it. I *do* want to win anyway, you know. I’m off.”

“Have a nice day!”

Father was planning to run a sale when I won, claiming that items from the shop had helped me to become King of the School Year. Personally, I was more interested in the rights associated with the title—and the enchanted prize.

I arrived on campus and headed directly for the school yard. The competition would take place there, inside the school building, as well as on the roof. Low-lethality magic was permitted in the yard and on the roof, but not in the building. Weapons were allowed inside, but only so long as you took care not to damage the place. Sword-users were using wooden swords, bow-wielders had arrowheads that were less likely to cause injury, and every other weapon had similar safety options. After all, we didn’t want anyone to die.

“First-years, are you all here?” the vice-principal asked from the stage.

The principal was away on urgent business, so he was filling in. Today was just for the first-years, and he looked over us all.

“Welcome to your first King of the School Year Competition. You all know the rules—if the badge on your chest touches the ground, you’re out. Consider this a dry run for your future heroics.” Then he finished with an unexpected shout: “Fight like your lives depend on it!”

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to get us fired up. It made him come off as more unstable than anything. I found it a little unsettling. The badges had been distributed and affixed to our chests, and concealing them was against the rules. If your badge hit the ground, you were out. But if someone took it from you, you were safe—so long as you got it back. If someone *did* steal your badge, they had to fix it to their chest along with their own. Why did that rule exist anyway?

Ms. Elena whistled with her fingers. “One minute until the competition begins. Take up positions wherever you like. I’ll be your referee, but I won’t interfere unless there’s cheating.”

All of the teachers were watching, so flagrant cheating would be difficult. On that note, using weapons that weren't sanctioned by the school would earn you an instant expulsion, so I wasn't about to use my enchanted items.

With close to two hundred students present, it was hard to tell where anyone was. Everyone looked serious, keeping their distance from each other. Then the starting signal sounded, birds flew across the big, blue sky, and the entire student body moved at once. Some made a break for the building, and some tried to hide, while others attacked immediately. Little battles broke out across the yard.

"Hiyaaaaah!"

Someone came at me with a wooden sword. I blocked it with one hand and used my other to fire a Stone Bullet at their feet.

"Eeek?!"

"I'll be taking that."

I smacked my would-be assailant's badge off his chest, and it fell to the ground. The badges were only attached lightly, so it didn't take much to remove them. I'd have to be careful not to lose mine doing something stupid. Then, before I knew it, I was surrounded.

"You're in S-Class, aren't you? No hard feelings, but we've gotta take out the strongest players while we've still got the energy to put up a fight."

I'd never seen these five, but they seemed to be from lower-ranked classes. I hadn't even considered this kind of tactic—working as a team to eliminate the strongest, then duking it out between yourselves at the end. It was clever.

"Are you all ready to fire?"

"Yessir!"

Well, that didn't sound good. We were out in the school yard, so spells were permitted. I hastily made a box of Stone Walls.

"Get him!"

I heard them fire off Stone Bullets or something similar, but the wall just about managed to protect me.

“Phew, that was close.”

But now my own defense had me kinda trapped. I’d have to wait for the walls to disappear.

“Dammit, what do we do? Go after someone else?”

Yes, I thought. *Do that.*

But my hopes were crushed.

“Wait, it’s open on top. You go check it out.”

I could have closed the top off if I wanted, but I deliberately left it open. I could hear one of them moving around outside. The real question was whether he’d just peer over to assess the situation or come in all guns blazing. I heard a thud, like he’d kicked the wall.

“Hide all you like, it’s not gonna save you!”

He’d used the wall for leverage—jumping over the box and firing a skill down from above. It was dangerous to stay put, so I jumped straight up. I had A-Grade Jumping, so I soared over his head easily.

“What the heck?! How can he jump so high?”

I fired off a four-inch Stone Bullet, aiming for the badge on his chest and knocking it to the ground. As I landed, I fired off a second shot at one of the others, but he managed to dodge out of the way. I quickly closed the distance between us and grabbed his badge with my bare hand, tossing it aside.

“Three left, huh?”

“Don’t let him spook you! Did you see how small the Stone Bullet was? He probably isn’t very good with spells.”

Actually, I can just control it. I fired off an almost two-foot diameter Stone Bullet at the guy’s feet, and he frantically jumped aside—diving to the ground. The impact freed his badge from his shirt, and the other two fell just as easily. They were probably in D-or E-Class.

“Well, that was a good start,” I said. “And my badge is still safe—”

Wait. I couldn’t believe my own eyes. Where had my badge gone...?

I hadn't taken a single hit. Maybe it had fallen off when I jumped? I counted the badges on the ground, but mine definitely wasn't there.

"That's weird. Who could've taken it?"

I looked around and noticed a lone girl. She immediately looked down at the ground, her long, black hair covering her eyes. She was petite and had a dark aura about her. She was also carrying a boomerang, and for some reason, had two badges on her chest.

"Don't tell me—that's where it went?!"

She nodded. How had she managed that? Discerning Eye gave me the answer.

Name: Ficia Otto

Age: 16

Species: Human

Level: 26

Occupation: Student

Skills: Boomerang Handling (Grade C), Telekinesis

Telekinesis: The ability to physically move an object by focusing on it.

What the...? That's cheating!

She must have snatched it while I was fighting. At least she hadn't discarded it yet.

"Join forces with me," she said. "Then I'll give it back."

Maybe I was approaching this all wrong. You weren't disqualified until your badge hit the ground, so it was possible to make other people follow your orders like this.

"So your plan is to gather more allies?" I asked.

“No. That would put me at risk. I only need one or two *powerful* allies.”

The more underlings she collected, the more careful she'd have to be with all those badges. I'd clearly made a tactical error, but now I could make use of her skill. Maybe this was a lucky development after all.

“You'll really give it back?” I asked. “Seems like it'd be easy to toss it once you're done with me.”

“I keep my promises. When we're the last two standing, I'll give it back.”

But she had to know she didn't stand a chance in a one-on-one confrontation. What else did she have up her sleeve? Either way, it would be best to work with her for the time being.

“All right, I guess I don't have much choice.”

She nodded and pointed to a corner of the yard. “Someone's hiding behind that tree. Start a fight to create a distraction.”

“Sure, I guess. What class are you in anyway?”

“B-Class.”

“Were you angling for me from the start?”

“Yes. You made an impression during the entrance exam.”

I supposed turning up with the skull of a dead reaper and earning a ton of points would do that. We watched our backs and moved toward the tree.

“I know you're hiding back there,” Ficia called. “Come out.”

“Tch, I was planning to hide until it was all over.”

A girl appeared from behind the tree, smiling daringly. She didn't have any weapons, but Discerning Eye told me she was skilled in Earth Magic. Her name was Sitrah. Most of the weapons users had moved inside the building, so basically everyone still out here had magic. Since casting was prohibited inside, the power gap was substantial.

“You're up, Underling No. 1,” said Ficia.

“I have a name, you know.”

But it was futile to stand up to my captor, so I attacked Sitrah with my wooden sword. She put one hand on the ground and smirked. Suddenly, a wall of soil blocked my path, but I'd expected that. I jumped over it with ease, landing behind her and swinging my sword in a horizontal arc. Sitrah reacted quickly, side-stepping away and opening a space between us.

"Phew, that was close," she said. "You're S-Class, aren't you?"

"I'm guessing you're in A."

"Bingo. But my abilities are easily S-Class. Guess why I'm not there."

Her powers were definitely impressive, but I couldn't think why she'd want to stick to a lower class.

"There are a ton of nobles in S-Class, aren't there?" she said. "I hate it. It's a miniature version of high society. It's stifling. I couldn't breathe."

I kinda agreed. I'd hated a lot of the people in my class at first. But after I got used to the atmosphere, I found that most of them weren't so bad.

"If a member of A-Class were to win, that'd put all you S-Class goons to shame, wouldn't it?" Sitrah said.

"I'm not sure anyone would really care. Plus, there's no way you're going to win." I smiled and pointed to her badge as it floated through the air.

"Huh? HUUUUH? No way!"

"Now, look over there."

I pointed at Ficia, who was staring intently at the badge. This time, I'd noticed her doing it. When Sitrah started talking, the badge slowly pulled away from her chest. It was hard to see your own chest anyway, and talking to someone else made it even harder to notice. Sitrah realized she was in trouble and sprinted after her badge.

"Come baaaaack!"

Plop!

Unfortunately, she was too late.

"Idiot," said Ficia.

And with that, she turned around and left. As I followed, I glanced back to see Sitrah hanging her head.

By now, the situation in the yard had changed drastically. A lot of people had been disqualified, and there were only a handful left. One of them came charging at me.

“Ha ha ha ha! You’re so careless, Noir! No one can stop me now!”

It was Kento. He was a plain kid and didn’t really stand out, but he took pride in calling himself “Speed Star.” His tenacious attitude was definitely annoying. He could probably run right past someone and snatch their badge. I didn’t even try to defend myself.

Whoosh!

Kento streaked by, touching my chest as he passed.

“I win. One step closer to total victo—what?!”

“Joke’s on you,” I said. “I don’t have my badge.”

“What is the meaning of this—hnngh?!”

A boomerang hit Kento’s feet, pitching him forward and sending his badge flying.

“Idiot No. 2,” said Ficia.

I had racked up another victory without lifting a finger. Ficia and I were the only people left outside.

“Are you ready to go inside?” I asked.

“Any time, Underling No. 1,” she said, expressionless.

I shrugged, and she headed into the building just as Maria, the duke’s daughter, burst out alongside her attendant, Amane. I tensed up, but the two of them looked dejected, and their badges were missing.

“Oh, goodness,” said Maria. “Mr. Noir, do take care if you go inside.”

“Whoever beat you must be really powerful,” I said.

“Indeed, we were utterly bested. I believe you’re quite familiar with her.”

So, either Emma or Leila. Just then, Ms. Elena came over.

“No excessive talking to people who have been disqualified.”

“My apologies,” said Maria. “I’m rooting for you, Mr. Noir.”

She and Amane left quietly. Ms. Elena glanced at my chest and raised an eyebrow, but she figured out what had happened right away.

“Ha ha, I see Ficia’s ability got the best of you.”

“She said she’d give it back at the end...”

“So naive!”

Well, it wasn’t like I believed she’d give it back without a fight.

“Silence, Ms. Booty,” said Ficia. “No, I mean, Ms. Erotica.”

“Neither of those are right!”

Ficia didn’t fear Ms. Elena one bit. She was incredible. In the future, she’d be a real force to be reckoned with.

The two of us headed inside, and Ms. Elena followed to keep watch. There was no one on the first floor, so we moved up to the second. The air was silent, but a figure stood at the end of the long hallway, oozing a powerful aura.

“I knew you’d come,” said Leila. “I beat pretty much everyone else already. I was getting bored”

“So,” I said. “You’re the one who beat Maria and Amane, huh?”

“How are you doing, by the way?” Leila asked. “Surely you didn’t have your badge stolen...?”

“Ha ha ha... Well, it’s only temporary...”

“Hmm, well, whatever. I’m just here to fight.”

Leila’s masterful stance was quite terrifying. Magic was prohibited in here, and I didn’t stand a chance in straight-up physical confrontation.

“She’s on a whole different level from the others we’ve dealt with,” I warned Ficia. “We need a plan.”

“We’ll just do the same thing.”

“No, that’s almost definitely not gonna work.”

“Oh, it will. Abandon your fear and fight, No. 1.”

This was useless. Ficia didn’t know Leila, so she wasn’t going to change her mind. Time to sink or swim. I walked toward Leila and dropped into a low stance, raising my wooden sword over my head. I was confident in my speed, but Leila dodged and followed up with a powerful punch.

“Eek!”

I shrieked, but I managed to evade it. What a relief! Her Demon Fist skill didn’t count as magic, so it was fair game in here. Eating that would put you in the hospital, but I had to trust in Leila’s common sense. I had to trust her...

By now, Ficia was using her Telekinesis. Leila’s badge silently detached from her chest.

“Would you knock it off with your little tricks?”

Leila snatched the badge out of the air and put it back in its rightful place.

See? It didn’t work.

To make matters worse, Leila turned on Ficia and charged.

I frantically chased after her.

Ficia countered with Leila boomerang. “Ngh! Who do you think you are?”

With a thwap, Leila’s Demon Fist smashed the boomerang to pieces. Ficia looked shocked, and Leila stepped in to shove her. It didn’t look very powerful, but Ficia went flying.

Oh, no! Where did my badge go?!

Both badges had come off and were flying through the air. I frantically reached out to grab them, and Ficia did the same.

“No. 1...save me...”

“I swear I will!”

Our hands slipped past each other, and we both hit the floor.

Clack!

The sound of a badge hitting the floor echoed down the hall. I closed my hand around my own, and my heart flooded with relief. I'd barely caught it in time.

"You're...so cruel," said Ficia.

I stood up and fixed the badge back on my chest.

"The feeling's mutual," I said. "Leave the rest to No. 1."

Not that I really stood a chance of winning!

I didn't need to defeat Leila, I just needed her badge. I ran through all sorts of options in my head. As I watched Ficia slink away, it hit me: I could use Telekinesis too. I wouldn't get another chance, so it was worth a try. I spent 500 LP on the skill and concentrated on Ficia's fallen badge to check that it worked.

Wobble, wobble.

The badge was suspended in the air, rising and falling. Larger objects would be impossible, but it was easy to manipulate something so small. Now I had some kind of chance.

"Ooh, a new skill?" Leila asked. "That little trick didn't work last time."

"Yeah, but this time I'm the one using it."

"I think I know what you'll do. But can you pull it off?"

Leila beckoned with her fingers. I'd just have to find a way to betray her expectations. I lunged at her with my wooden sword, but Leila moved like a hornet—dodging nimbly before shifting to counterattack. I couldn't let her break my only weapon, so I quickly drew it back. I'd already seen what her Demon Fist did to Ficia's boomerang. If I couldn't use any other weapons or magic, I was done for. I could barely keep track of her sharp punches and kicks.

"Ngh, even if I know what you'll do, you sure are fast," I said.

"I have to say, your bladework's gotten quicker too."

Leila glanced at her chest to ensure her badge was still there. She wasn't about to drop her guard. I considered using Telekinesis, but there were no gaps in her defense. Besides, the moment I got my hands on her badge, she'd just

kick it away and send me flying.

“I’m clearly at a disadvantage,” I said. “I’ve gotta be bold!”

I pulled back, then followed through with a Power Slash. It was designed to knock opponents off their feet, so it was hard to defend against. Even with a wooden sword, it would hurt. But Leila’s eyes were calm and resolute as she wound up with her right fist.

Thwaaaaack!

It was the boomerang situation all over again. My sword shattered, sending scraps of wood flying. We both knew this was it. Lelia checked her badge again. She knew I’d used that move deliberately to throw her off guard. That I was watching for the right moment to use Telekinesis. And she was right. But my target wasn’t her badge on her chest, it was a small fragment of my sword. The smaller it was, the easier it would be to control. I found a good one and focused my Telekinesis on it.

“Nngh?!”

The splinter shot out like a bullet, knocking Leila’s badge from her chest. She was so focused on her badge that she didn’t have time to react.

“I’m not done yet!”

She reached out for the badge, but I crouched down and blocked her way, launching an uppercut at her jaw.

“Ugh...”

She groaned as she twisted away. I had to respect her reflexes, but this time, they worked to my advantage.

Ka-tunk!

The badge fell to the floor behind her.

“Phew. Almost didn’t make it that time.” I grinned.

“That was clever. I never thought you’d use that new power on the wood.”

“If I’d used it on the badge directly, you would have just snatched it back.”

“Either way, I lost this time. You’d better win the whole thing now,” she said

encouragingly. “I know you’ve got it in you.”

And with that, Leila gallantly withdrew—accepting her loss without a word of complaint. She really was incredible.

I picked up what was left of my sword. “About half of it is still intact. Might as well keep it, just in case.”

I searched the rest of the second and third floors, but no one was left.

“I think they’re up on the roof,” Ms. Elena called out.

That made sense. I opened the door to the roof and felt the breeze wash over my skin. There was only one student waiting for me.

“Emma. I knew it’d be you.”

“Hiya! You sure took your time.”

It seemed she’d already eliminated the others. Still, the main thing that caught my attention was her clothes. They weren’t the kind of thing she usually wore. Her shoulders and stomach were on full display in a tube top and miniskirt, and the hem of her skirt was torn. Her battles must have been just that rough. I could almost see something, but it was hard to be sure.

“Y-you’re trying a different style today, huh?” I asked.

“Thought I’d experiment a bit,” she said. “It’s real easy to move in.”

“R-right. S-so I guess we’re the last two.”

“Yup, seems like. How long has it been since we fought each other?”

“Ages...for sure. You always beat me too.”

I was always too slow against her daggers and Wind Magic.

Emma had a wooden dagger in each hand and a sharp look in her eye. “Now I’m the underdog,” she said.

“It’s basically no holds barred. Let’s let our skills shine.”

I timidly approached, but perplexingly, Emma began jumping in place. It was probably some kind of warm-up, but as a side effect, her boobs bounced like crazy. In that revealing top and miniskirt, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“Well, lemme do a little warm-up first,” she said.

This time she started stretching. When she leaned forward, I got an eyeful of her cleavage. When she stretched left and right, the hem of her skirt fluttered. I could see her white thighs. If it went just...just a fraction higher...

I shook my head, trying to rid my mind of such base desires, but taking my eyes off my opponent was dangerous. She could attack at any moment.

“A-are you done yet?” I asked.

“Almost. Hnn!”

It was almost like she was pushing her breasts together for some reason.



My sense of reason was losing to my baser instincts, and I couldn't fight when my lower half was so...“energetic.” To make things worse, Ms. Elena was *right there*. How embarrassing would it be if she thought I was turned on in the middle of a fight? I pulled my hips back, trying to hide the change as much as possible.

“Hope you're ready, Noir!”

“Wait, now?!”

I was hoping she'd keep stretching until things settled down a little...

I parried Emma's fierce attack with the remains of my sword. It wouldn't last much longer. She was putting me on the defense, trying to get me to withdraw while I was still in this awkward position. She fired off a roaring Wind Strike and took my badge off with it. She'd aimed so well that it didn't even touch me.

My badge flew several yards and was about to fall when I frantically focused my mind to keep it in the air. It floated less than five inches off the floor.

“You nearly got me there,” I said.

I retrieved it and put it back on my chest.

“Wh-what was that skill?” Emma asked. “You got a new one, huh? Well, you're not the only one who's learned new things.”

She kicked up on seemingly nothing and moved through the air.

“Huh?”

“It's a Wind Kick! When I kick up, the wind supports my leg!”

It was clever, and she was giving it her all, but it was difficult to respond. I was still trying to hide my shame. I reflexively fired a small Stone Bullet, but Emma just kicked it away and lunged at my chest with her dagger. My badge nearly hit the ground again, but I focused my Telekinesis on it.

“Again?!” Emma shouted.

I barely made it in time. I picked it up and made a break for it.

“It's my turn now,” I said, firing a Water Drop at her feet.

Emma was too quick for it to actually hit her, but that wasn't what I was trying to do. My real objective was to get the floor wet. After that, I swapped to Iceball. Again, Emma dodged it easily, but that wasn't really the point. The water I'd just laid down froze over.

"Ugh, it's so slippery," Emma complained.

As a bonus, it would lower her body temperature too. Emma was fairly defenseless as she focused on keeping her balance, so I fired a tiny Stone Bullet at her chest.

"Ah!"

Her badge clattered to the ground, and I hurried forward to stop her from falling.

"Here, take my hand."

"Thanks! Even if we are enemies."

"Well, not anymore."

"Oh, right. You really are strong, Noir."

"And you've grown so much, Emma. If I hadn't had Telekinesis, you definitely would have won."

"Eh he he he! I'm glad I got to show off my new skills, at least."

Her smile was adorable, and up close, her sex appeal was insane. She'd sure grown in *other* departments too...but I decided to keep that to myself.

Ms. Elena clapped her hands. "Congratulations, Noir. You're the King of the School Year."

"Hooray! I won!"

I balled my hands into fists and pumped them in the air. It was a close fight, but somehow, I'd made it.

"By the way, why do you keep standing like that?" Ms. Elena asked with an impish grin.

All I could do was laugh awkwardly.

“I...guess I should be happy about that too,” Emma mumbled, looking bashful.

Chapter 7:

I'd Give My Left Arm

ONCE THE COMPETITION WAS OVER, they brought me up on stage so the vice-principal could acknowledge me. He commended me for surviving and encouraged me to do my best in the upcoming interschool tournament. Because I'd won, I automatically qualified as one of the Hero Academy's representatives. But more importantly, I had earned 3,000 LP by fulfilling my goal and winning the competition. I had about 12,500 LP now, and two more avenues for LP profit were about to open up.

"Now I will present the King of the School Year with the enchanted items," said the vice-principal. "You may pick any of these."

Three teachers lined up in front of me, each holding a different item. I was happy I got to pick up and inspect each one. The "Blasting Hammer," the "Collar of Concealment," and the "Moon Drop." They were all A and B-Grade items, and all appealing in their own way, but I was primarily interested in LP.

They were worth 3,000, 4,600, and 7,000 respectively, so the Moon Drop was by far the most valuable. It had a skill that boosted physical and magical power in the moonlight. As strong as it was, it was limited to moonlit nights.

I picked it up, but I couldn't exactly convert it on the spot, so I saved that for later.

"And for your other prize," said the vice-principal. "You're bestowed with the Right of the King. For today and today only, you can issue orders to the entire student body."

This was what I had been waiting for. I couldn't ask for anything crazy—the order wouldn't work if the students completely rejected the idea. I just needed something they would go for, and something that would earn me LP. I already had an idea.

"As your king, I order you all...to give me a hug."

The crowd buzzed. The main reaction seemed to be, "Why a hug?"

“Are you sure about that?” asked the vice-principal. “There are almost two hundred students here.”

“Oh, well, just the girls then.”

I wouldn’t get any LP from the boys after all.

“Wow, what a pervert,” someone heckled.

“You want the boys to do it too?” I asked. “Hugging another guy would be a little awkward.”

“I guess that’s true.”

After the boys realized that, they settled down.

“Okay,” I said, getting down off the stage. “Whoever’s cool with giving me a hug, line up.”

The girls seemed unexpectedly enthusiastic. I was a little surprised.

The vice-principal smirked. “Of course they’re excited. Women are always attracted to strong men. I wish I could hug a pretty girl...”

I walked up to the first girl and made sure she was okay with it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes...”

She seemed a little shy, but we hugged. When I’d confirmed I’d gotten the LP, I let go. I was nervous, but after getting through a few, I was getting used to it. Even Ficia was in line for some reason.

“Umm, do you want to give me a hug?” I asked.

“I’m not happy about it,” she said. “But we are acquaintances now.”

“Ha ha ha...got it.”

She was probably thinking that I’d be useful in the future. Maybe she was a little *too* honest about her motives, but I accepted them for what they were.

When I hugged a girl for the first time, I’d get up to a few hundred LP—although it varied depending on how attractive I found her. Unsurprisingly, I got more from the cute girls. Only a few refused. We had just shy of a hundred girls

in class, so I earned LP from about ninety people.

“I think this is a new record!”

I’d earned about 26,000 LP, bringing me up to 38,500. With the 7,000 I’d earn from the Moon Drop, that would total 45,500 LP. All in all, a huge win.

Apparently, the school representatives would be meeting with the other participants in the interschool tournament in a few days. But for today? We were done. So Emma and I headed to Odin’s guild hall. Since Lola had assisted me privately, I wanted to tell her about my win.

“Are you doing anything the day after tomorrow?” Emma asked on the way.

“Not really.”

“My parents are going on vacation, so I wondered if I could come over for dinner. It’s been ages since we did that.”

“Of course. Everyone would love to see you, Emma.”

“Thanks! I can’t wait!”

She seemed happy as she locked arms with me.

However, because she was wearing such skimpy clothes, I could distinctly feel her skin against mine. It secretly earned me some more LP. What luck!



When we got to the guild hall, I told Lola about the competition. She seemed so happy. It was almost like she'd won it herself.

"I always knew you would do it, Mr. Noir. And then your hug victory lap afterward! I'd like to participate too."

She wrapped her arms around me, and Emma shot her a dirty look. When Lola saw her, she looked shocked.

"What's with that getup? You're dressed like some kind of sex pervert."

"I...I guess I can't really deny that," Emma said. "Much as it pains me."

"I'm not one to criticize others for their taste," Lola said. "But it's not the best time to wear that sort of thing."

"What do you mean?"

"There's been a string of murders. Mostly sex workers and other women wearing attention-grabbing outfits."

According to Lola, even one of Odin's female adventurers had been attacked. Thankfully, she'd survived, but not without serious injury. That didn't seem like much to be grateful for.

"The guildmaster's real mad," Lola said. "If this monster isn't caught soon, the guildmaster might put out a bounty for his head."

Maybe I was imagining it, but the mood in the guildhall *did* seem heavy.

"But you shouldn't get involved, Mr. Noir," Lola said. "You need to keep yourself out of trouble until the date for the A-Rank exam is settled."

"What about me?" Emma asked.

"What kind of casket would you like to be buried in?" Lola asked.

"I'm not going to die! And besides, I'm not planning on wearing this anymore."

"Oh, reeeeeeally? I'm not sure I believe you."

They were always like this—sniping and snapping at each other. Still, I was worried about Emma, so I saw her home. After that, I stopped by Stardian

Rarities and told my father and Tigerson about my win.

“Aha! Now the shop will become even *more* prosperous!”

<I expected no less of you, my friend. I have been hard at work collecting stock, and with Olivia’s help supplying additional products, our sales are up 250 percent from last month.> “That’s incredible!” I said. “I’m sure the shop will become an even greater success with both of you around.”

<We will all do our best.> “All right!” said my father. “Time to celebrate! Let’s drink ourselves silly!”

We closed the shop up early and headed out. Although...I did wonder if Father was just using my victory as an excuse to get drunk.

I returned to the seventeenth floor of the hidden dungeon, which was still a wide expanse of natural beauty. The beach and the forest were exactly the same as the last time I was there. As I walked along the sand, I reached down to touch the water. I was almost convinced I’d really arrived on a small island.

“Whatever’s creating this illusion is incredible. It’s even made actual waves.”

Or maybe it wasn’t an illusion. I mean, there were even shells in the sand. After relaxing a bit, I headed toward the forest. There were small bugs and venomous snakes in the trees, and some of them even tried to attack me, but I took them out as I went. It was humid, so I was quite sweaty and sticky. I searched for quite a while, but I didn’t encounter any monsters. This place was huge!

“There’s no way I’ll find the stairs like this. Time to consult the Great Sage.”

I did have a headache immunity skill, but the more valuable the information, the stronger the headache, so I was a little scared.

<There are stairs located at 480 yards south, 1,129 yards northeast, and 683 yards north.> “There are *three* sets?!”

I hadn’t encountered anything like that before. Although, I supposed there could have been multiple sets before, and I had just never noticed. There were a few floors with split paths, after all.

Since the stairs to the south were closest, I started off toward them. If real-world rules applied here, I could tell which way was south by cutting down a tree and looking at the rings. Still, something about my surroundings was bothering me. I felt like someone was watching from a short distance ahead.

“Is someone there?”

No response. All the trees and grass provided plenty of places to hide. I went back to searching for the stairs, but the moment I turned my back, I heard a whoosh. I turned to see a spear flying right at me.

I ducked to avoid the attack, but I still couldn't see my opponent. I pulled the spear out of the tree and examined the tip. It was covered in some kind of liquid. Probably poison.

“Well, if you're trying to kill me, I'm gonna fight back.”

I fired several Stone Bullets in the direction the spear had come from, and a man appeared from atop a tree. He was shirtless, wearing only a straw skirt and a wooden mask. He must have been who'd thrown the spear.

I took out the Shield of Champions to show that their attacks weren't going to hurt me. Several more spears flew toward me, but most of them came from the front, so I blocked them with ease.

There must have been about five or six people in total. The attack ceased, presumably because they'd run out of spears. I put my shield away and took out the Shockwave Morningstar—the weapon I'd acquired in the arena on the thirteenth floor. I ran toward my enemies, hurling the ball at a tree. It exploded, but the real show was still to come. Thanks to the skill on the weapon, a massive shock wave followed.

“Hngh...”

One of them groaned, and several others fell out of the tree.

The biggest one of them stood in front of me. “You fight me!”

They were all wearing the same masks and grass skirts. Were they the natives of this island?

The man held a beautiful lyre to his chest. It was an odd contrast with his

well-muscled form.

“What, are you going to make me listen to a recital?” I asked.

“Foolish.”

His fingers strummed the lyre. It wasn't really music, but the tone was splendid. Still, this really wasn't the time to be appreciating its aesthetics. Especially because arrows started raining down from the sky.

“Whoa?!”

I retreated quickly as almost a dozen arrows buried themselves in the ground. The large, masked man strummed on the lyre again, and more weapons hailed down. This time, it was iron balls the size of my head! I couldn't afford to get hit by one of them, and I was a little scared at the prospect of trying to block them with my shield, so I wove between the balls and advanced toward the man. After all, if I stayed on the defensive, I'd only dig myself in deeper. Taking this guy out in one fell swoop was the way to win.

Once I was clear of the iron rain, I combined Water Drop and Lightning Strike and fired them at the masked man. He collapsed to the ground in pain, drenched and crackling with electricity. I collected his lyre, drew my sword, and pressed the tip against the back of his neck.

“So you can speak? Are you all human?”

“Intruders, kill them all.”

My Discerning Eye didn't work on him, but he didn't seem all that strong. He probably just had Spear Throwing or something like that.

“There are intruders other than me?” I asked.

“Yes. Kill him too.”

Who else was down here...? I stepped back as one of the other masked men came forward with a dagger.

“Escape once. Search for stronger weapon...”

The man with the dagger helped his comrade up, and they all retreated.

“Search for a weapon, huh?”

That seemed to imply this stronger weapon wasn't something that they already had. It made me wonder if they'd found the lyre on this level too. I checked it out with my Discerning Eye.

Orpheus's Lyre

Grade B

Skills: Rain of Weapons

Depending on how it was played, it could summon different weapons from the sky. It might not have sounded all that interesting, but I'd seen enough to know it was terrifying. It would also give me 4,900 LP if I converted it. I was a little hesitant, but I ended up pulling the trigger. That put me over 50,000 LP. Things were going well! At this rate, I'd have the hundred thousand in no time.

"I think I'll go item hunting before I look for the stairs."

I did have the Bell of Perception after all. I figured I might as well make use of it. The bell would give away my location, but I used it anyway. It rang softly, and I walked around until the sound got louder. When I got to one particular tree, the bell made a loud noise.

"I guess it's hidden in the tree."

I checked every inch of the plant—from the roots to the branches to the leaves—but couldn't find anything. Maybe it was hidden *inside* the tree? I cut it down and discovered...absolutely nothing! What was going on here? The bell was *definitely* ringing. I tried holding it out again. When I crouched down close to the ground, it rang clearly.

"Underground, huh?"

I pulled a shovel out of my Pocket Dimension and started digging. I'd given myself an Excavate skill when I acquired my two-edged blade, so I was pretty good at it. I dug for fifteen to twenty minutes until my shovel hit something hard. It was a wooden treasure chest. I pulled it out of the ground and opened it up to find...a cord?

Grade B

Skills: Bind Magical Beast

It only worked on magical beasts, but it made them easier to restrain. Still, I couldn't think of any real use for it, so I converted it and earned 3,800 LP in the process.

I set off with the bell again, looking for another enchanted item. The second one was buried too.

Fiery Frying Pan

Grade B

Skills: Heat Up

You just had to touch the pan for twenty seconds and it'd get hot enough to cook something. What an amazing item! When you were adventuring, you had to eat often. With something like this, you wouldn't have to go through all the trouble of gathering wood to make a fire every time. It was only worth 2,800 LP, so I decided to hang onto it.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

I looked over at where the sound was coming from and spotted two masked men running at full speed. It didn't seem like they'd noticed me. I thought they might be hunting, until I realized they were running away from something. Whatever they were fleeing from, they seemed very concerned about it. After they passed me, I heard hoofbeats. Moments later, their pursuer ran past too. I was already familiar with this spear-wielding monster. Yes, it was none other than the Black Lancer.

He looked like a man with long black hair and gleaming red eyes, but he wasn't human. He didn't have a helmet, but he was wearing black armor. The gold ornamentation made it look rather flashy. His lance was just as black as his armor. He cut a striking image astride his crimson steed.

"He can appear down here too?!"

I shouldn't have been surprised; he could show up anywhere. He was no doubt the other intruder the masked men were talking about.

Should I go after them? No one seemed to have noticed me, so I could have just left, but my body moved on its own. I didn't want to spend the rest of my time in this dungeon cowering in fear of the Black Lancer. And besides, I had a real chance of beating him.

I ran after them, and before long, I heard men shouting. Seven or eight of the tribesmen were fighting the Black Lancer on an open stretch of beach. There

were already several corpses scattered about, but just as the tribesmen looked like they were sure to lose, the lancer's horse fell into a hole.

"Ah, they prepared traps in advance."

The tribesmen threw all their spears at once. "Kill intruder!"

But they didn't so much as scratch the lancer's armor.

"I have no interest in weaklings."

He swung his lance like it was nothing. The pile of corpses grew.

"Leave to me!" cried a masked man with a whip.

He skillfully wrapped the weapon around the lancer's arm.

"Fool."

An electric shock shot out of the whip.

Paralyzing Whip

Grade C

Skills: Electric Tail

It seemed it was enchanted to only affect the target, not the user. Unfortunately, it didn't work on the lancer either.

“Not work... Then this...”

The tribesman threw the whip away and drew a wooden wand from his grass skirt. He pointed it at the lancer, and three balls of fire flew out in quick succession.

Triple-Fire Wand

Grade B

Triple Fireball

It was much more powerful than his previous weapon. Surely this one would give the lancer a hard time? But he just waved his lance about, destroying all three fireballs with ease. I knew this guy was a monster, but boy, oh, boy, was he ever a *monster*. These were the lancer's abilities:

Name: Black Lancer

Level: 666

Skills: Devastation Thrust; Elusive Thrust; Javelin Throw (Grade S); Total Magical Resistance (Grade B)

"I seek a worthy opponent."

He thrust his lance through the masked man's torso, killing him instantly. That had to be the Devastation Thrust ability. The last time I'd encountered him, he had destroyed a sword with S-Grade Enduring Edge in one hit. I was confident the same thing would happen to my shield.

The lancer picked off the remaining survivors, and his crimson steed finally escaped the hole. He quickly got back up on his horse and turned to me.

"So there *is* a worthy opponent here after all."

"Aw, shucks, I'm honored that you remember me," I said. *I really wouldn't mind if you'd forgotten.*

"You will not escape this time."

"Oh, I don't intend to."

At least, not until things got a little too dangerous for my tastes.

"Have at you."

His horse neighed and charged, but it didn't come straight at me. Instead, the lancer rode in circles around where I was standing. He made several laps, then changed course and barreled forward. The lancer lunged at me using a powerful

mounted attack. If it had landed, his lance would have gone straight through me, but I leapt to the side and somehow managed to avoid it. The horse went back to running laps.

“Going for a battle of attrition, huh?” I asked. “Or are you just trying to make me dizzy?”

As long as he was on horseback, the lancer’s mobility would remain exceedingly high. Time to crush that advantage. I made the skill “Misstep” and Bestowed it on his horse. It cost 2,000 LP, but I went ahead with it anyway. Now all I had to do was wait. The horse turned toward me, and...

It whinnied, stumbled, and fell to the ground. Quickly sensing that something was wrong, the lancer hastily dismounted. I seized my chance, slitting the horse’s throat before it could get up.

That should make things a bit easier, I thought.

“You slay my beloved steed?”

“Why do you wanna kill a worthy enemy anyway?”

“My instincts command me to do so. It is my purpose.”

I supposed he had been created by the dungeon. But it was odd that he didn’t just attack intruders.

“If you want really strong opponents,” I said. “You’d have more luck deeper in the dungeon.”

“The farthest I can travel is the nineteenth floor.”

And he had never appeared to Olivia either. I’d first encountered him on Dory’s floor.

“So have you been fighting constantly for thousands of years?” I asked.

“I was awakened quite recently.”

Which meant that my arrival here had probably had something to do with it. Perhaps exploring a certain floor triggered his awakening. But why was he fighting other dungeon denizens indiscriminately, rather than just targeting outsiders? It was a mystery. Maybe he was meant to keep the dungeon

balanced, in case any unduly strong monsters developed. Were the dungeon's creators worried that overly powerful monsters could annihilate everything on their level and break the dungeon's mechanics? Either way, there was no time to think about it right now.

"I grow tired of idle chatter," said the lancer. "You must try to best me."

"You really don't have to ask."

I edited his S-Grade Javelin Throw skill to add the following line:

"When thrown, the lance will return to the user's heart with added force."

It cost me a hefty sum: 5,000 LP.

Next, I backed off and used magic: combining Stone Bullet with Holy Flame, then Water Drop with Lightning Strike. After that, I fired a stream of icicles at him. The lancer thwarted them all with swift flourishes. He even sliced through the electrified water. It did shock him when he made contact, but it did hardly any damage. It was either his B-Grade Total Magical Resistance—or just because he was so strong.

"Your crafty tricks will not work on me," said the lancer. "Is that sword mere decoration?"

"Aw, you caught me. But I don't fight with swords."

"I...have misjudged you!"

The lancer let his anger get the better of him and hurled his lance at me. It worked! I'd successfully provoked him into using it! His S-Grade Javelin Throw was impressively strong and fast, but I knew it was coming. The moment the lance left his hand, I dove to the ground. The lance sailed past and flew out across the beach.

No matter how much I'd Edited the skill, the spear wouldn't come back if it landed in a tree. Or if it did, its speed and force would be severely reduced. But the open space allowed the lance to trace a wide arc through the air as it turned back toward the lancer. At the same moment, I stowed my sword away, retrieved my Piercing Spear, and charged.

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

The lance flew back toward his heart at incredible speed, but he just grabbed it with one hand. This guy really was a monster!

“Guh...”

However, he left his stomach entirely unguarded, and my spear had a piercing skill. It struck smoothly through his armor and into his flesh.

“How’s it feel to be bested by another lance?” I asked.

“Bested...? Don’t make me laugh.”

A shiver ran down my spine. The battle wasn’t over yet. The lancer turned his lance around, and I yanked the Piercing Spear out and retreated. Blood poured from his mouth. This had to be working. I just needed to get one more hit in! But just as I was getting excited, a sharp pain ran through my left arm.

“Oww?!”

I looked down to find my arm was...gone? Blood gushed out, splashing onto my face.

“My, my arm...”

I fell to the ground.

What? Who did that? There was no one else here...only the lancer. But he’d just lifted his lance slightly. He hadn’t thrown it or anything.

“No way.”

“It ends here.”

“Ngh?!”

Crap! I stepped back like my life depended on it. A gust of wind blew through my hair, followed by a sharp pain from my forehead. Thankfully, the wound didn’t feel very deep.

“Elusive Thrust, huh...”

So, he’d finally decided to use it. I never imagined he’d be able to conceal almost *everything* about the skill. He ran my severed arm through with his lance and hoisted it high overhead.

“Stop tha—aaaah...”

He mangled it ruthlessly, scattering fingers and bits of flesh on the sand.

Dammit...my arm...

“I believe we are both equally spent,” said the lancer. “This ends on the next strike.”

He was pushing it too. I couldn’t use a spear well with one hand, so I put it away and retrieved my two-edged sword. I could always use my Dungeon Elevator skill. I could run away. But I wanted to settle things.

“Raaaaaagh!”

I roared and ran forward, but my face turned anguished, and I fell to one knee.

“My lance shall be your undoing!” said the lancer.

He took the opportunity, thrusting his spear forward angrily. At the same moment, I executed the sequence of actions I’d been forced to practice hundreds of times. I stood up, turned to avoid his lance, and used my momentum to slash him with my sword. My blade sent his head flying. Ultimately, which one of us lived came down to the last moment. And perfect timing.

“Haah...haah... Ms. Elena’s lessons sure came in handy.”

I had never earned a more painful victory. Almost nothing remained of my left arm. I was too weak to search for the stairs, but I did endure the pain long enough to collect the lancer’s weapon.

“I’ll turn your weapon into my strength.”

It earned me 500 LP. That was more than a regular weapon, but ultimately average. I was amazed at how much destruction he’d wrought with it. I went on to collect the Paralysis Whip and Triple Fireball Wand.

“I’ll take these too.”

Converting those earned me 5,500 LP. After that, I used my Dungeon Elevator. I’d defeated the strongest enemy of my life, and with that, I’d broken Level 200.

Chapter 8:

Face to Face

“BROTHER DEAREST?! Whatever is the matter?!”

I was barely hanging onto consciousness, but somehow, I made it home. It was already pitch-black as I collapsed at the front door, perhaps from the relief that I was finally back.

“Oh... Hey, Alice.”

“Y-your arm—ngh! Everyone, come quick! Our dear Noir needs help!”

My parents, Tigerson, and Olivia all came running. They were all at a loss for words. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen my father look so serious. Maybe never. But Olivia, who had many battles under her belt, remained calm. She looked at my wound and used some kind of skill. Warm light emitted from her hands as she healed me.

“What were you thinking, Noir? When you lose a limb, you need to stop the bleeding right away. Lots of people die from exsanguination.”

“Please go easy on me. I’ve never lost an arm before.”

“Well, if you can talk back to me, you’re gonna be fine. I’m not very good at healing, so this won’t do anything crazy, but it should keep the wound from getting infected.”

“Thanks. It feels a lot better already.”

“Ms. Olivia,” said Alice. “Please save my dear brother. Take my life to save his if you need to!”

“O-or mine!” said my father. “But I’d prefer a solution where we all remain alive!”

They’d both completely lost their composure.

<Calm down,> said Tigerson. <We ought to take Noir to a healer first.> “Yeah! Exactly!”

Alice and my father tried to put me on Tigerson’s back, but Olivia stopped

them.

“None of the healers in town can do much for him.”

<Then what shall we do? I cannot stand by and watch as the light drains from my friend’s eyes.> “Chill,” said Olivia. “It’s not like I want him to die either. But Noir’s the only one with the power to help himself.”

I’m the only one with the power... Did she mean by creating a skill?

“You’ve been working hard to earn LP lately, haven’t you?” she asked. “How much do you have now?”

“About fifty-three thousand.”

“Would you look at that!” She flashed a bubbly smile and placed one finger on my chest. “Try making a skill to regrow your arm.”

“Y-you can do that?”

She must’ve done it herself at some point in the past.

Regrow Left Arm — 20,000 LP

I trusted her, so I produced the skill. Once I told her I’d done it, she flashed an “okay” with her fingers.

“You could edit it to speed up the regrowth rate,” she said. “Or just make the skill faster to begin with, but it’ll bump the cost up a *lot*. Either way, it should grow back after a good night’s rest.”

I was grateful for the advice, but it didn’t really matter how long it took. Olivia and my father helped me to bed, and Alice brought me some water. Everyone stood over me as I laid my head down on my pillow and felt the strength leave my body. My eyelids grew heavy. I really hoped that my left arm would grow back the same as before...

My mind was fuzzy, but I could hear voices.

“We should turn him down this time.”

“But honey, he’s a valuable customer.”

“I will keep an eye on our dear Noir. His condition seems stable, and his arm has grown back. And Ms. Olivia is here too.”

It was my parents’ voices. And Alice.

Wait, did she say my arm grew back?

I sat up and checked. My left sleeve was missing, so I could clearly see the limb growing out of my shoulder. I touched it gently, then started to get more excited. It really was my arm, just as it had been before!

“Ooh, you’re up.”

“Oh, Brother, my dearest Brother, are you well?!”

“Yeah. At least, I think I am. I’m a little shocked that it actually grew back. It doesn’t hurt or anything.”

Everyone gathered around me, looking relieved. I’d have been lying if I said I wasn’t tired, but that was probably just because of how intense the fight had been. Olivia and Tigerson were in the living room, so I headed downstairs.

<*Oooh! Your arm grew back!*> “I told you so,” said Olivia. “Sometimes I do tell the truth!”

“Thank you,” I said. “Both of you. I wouldn’t have managed without you.”

“It’s not done yet,” said Olivia. “You should rest for another day or two.”

It seemed it was going to take a little time for my sensation and grip to return, although I could probably shorten the recovery with rehab. For now, I needed to eat. Over the table, my parents explained what they’d been talking about earlier. Apparently, one of the regulars at Stardian Rarities had invited them to dinner. He owned quite a lot of property and bought a lot from us. My father said he was holding a dinner party tonight.

“He invited us all, including Tigerson and Ms. Olivia.”

“Well, please, don’t worry about me,” I said. “I still need rest, but I’m not in any danger.”

It’d be good for business if they went. I promised I’d be good and rest, so my family agreed to go. It was already past five in the afternoon, so they all got

ready and headed out right away. Apparently, I really had slept for a long time.

When I was alone, I lay in bed and stared up at the ceiling, thinking things over. I'd spent a lot of LP regrowing my arm, but I still had about thirty-three thousand left. If I wanted to reach my hundred thousand target, I'd have to keep at the Item Conversion grind. There were probably still some useful things left on the seventeenth floor. I was still curious about the three sets of stairs too, but I'd solve that soon enough.

"Wait! I had plans with Emma today!"

I'd promised to have her over for dinner, since her parents were out of town, but everyone had gone out to that party. While I was trying to figure out what to do, Emma showed up.

"Hiya! I'm here!"

She was full of cheer, but she seemed disappointed to find the house empty.

"Huh? Where'd everyone go?"

"So, about that..."

I explained the situation. Emma's disappointment didn't last long.

"All right, then," she said. "Why don't the two of us go out to eat?"

"Yeah, that sounds good to me."

"Yay!"

And so, we left the house.

"Sorry," I said. "I know how much you were looking forward to dinner."

"It's totally fine. You guys are dealing with your own stuff," Emma said.

I couldn't help noticing her clothes. The outfit was much more reserved than the one she'd worn for the King of the School Year Competition, but it was still revealing. She was probably hoping I'd notice, so I mentioned it.

"I guess it *is* a lot of skin..." she said. "It was just so hot out."

"You should wear whatever you like. I'm just concerned about that serial killer."

He was attacking women in attention-grabbing clothes, and some adventurers had been seriously injured, so I had reason to be worried. Emma chuckled softly.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Heh heh, thanks for worrying about me.”

“Of course I worry about you. Maybe you should spend the night tonight.”

“I’d love to.”

“Then it’s settled.”

I told her she could use my room. I’d sleep in the living room.

We strolled around until we found a place to eat. We picked a restaurant famous for its delicious soup and bread.

“Congratulations! You’re our hundredth customer today!”

We lucked out. The place was having a campaign, and the hundredth customer ate free. We happily took our seats. While we were waiting for food, I overheard the people talking at a nearby table.

“That new weapons shop is opening soon.”

“Think they’re gonna have a big opening sale?”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath. They’re a famous chain from another kingdom. I have a friend from there, and apparently all the top-class adventurers and soldiers use their products.”

They had to be talking about Santage Arms and Armor. They weren’t even open yet, and people were already talking. It was a good sign for their business. Emma noticed it too.

“Mira’s family sure is famous, huh? That girl’s impressive—in more ways than one.”

“Well, she uses enchanted items and she’s high level. I dunno if it’s just her genes or because she’s been handling them since she was a kid.”

“Either way, we should try to make friends with her,” said Emma.

That was a good idea. Mira could be difficult, but she wasn't a bad person. Plus, getting a discount at their shop would be a huge bonus.

After dinner, Emma stopped at a bar to pick up some alcohol on our way home.

"You wanna drink?" I asked.

"Honestly, after that night at the bar with Mira, I kinda got hooked," she said bashfully.

I was a little worried. "Just make sure you don't become an alcoholic."

"I just wanna drink with you, Noir."

I couldn't really argue with that. We bought some snacks to go with our drinks and headed home. As we drank together, Emma started growing weary.

"Noooir, you know, I, Emma Brightness, have something to ask you."

"You know you can ask me, *the* Noir Stardia, whatever you like."

"Let's take a bath together!"

That was...a little surprising. I was confused, but then Emma pulled something out of her bag. It was a bathing suit.

"You were planning for this?" I asked.

"Eh he he he! We always used to bathe together as kids! You gotta respect your roots after all!"

I didn't think that wasn't what that phrase meant, but I kept that to myself. Besides, she was right—we *had* taken baths together when we were kids...

"I'll wash your back!" Emma said. "Let's gooo!"

She'd planned for this, so it couldn't be entirely motivated by the alcohol. I decided to indulge her. I went into my room and changed into a pair of swim trunks before heading to the bathroom. Emma was already inside.

"M-mind if I come in?" I asked.

"Sure thing!"

"Thanks for having me..." I mumbled. *What am I even saying? This is my own*

home.

My heart pounded as I walked in and saw Emma in her bathing suit. It was a really sexy cut, and not exactly reminiscent of our previous encounters in that room. The bath was already drawn, so it seemed my family had used it already.

“Okay,” she said. “Have a seat. I’ll wash your back.”

“S-sure.”

I sat down on one of the bath stools. I’d never been so anxious in my own bathroom before! Emma worked up a nice lather, then gently applied it to my back.

“Anyfing boddering you?” she asked.

Her drunken slurs were kinda cute.

“Nope, I’m fine.”

“Wow Noir, your back is soooo biiig.”

Something soft squished against my back as a drunk Emma snaked her arms around me.

“E-Emma?”

“I’m feewing kinda sweepy...”

“You can’t sleep here, it’s dangerous. Let’s just rinse off and get out.”

I splashed us with water, rinsing the soap off.

Emma stared at me with glassy eyes. “I thought I’d give you some LP with a hug.”

“Oh, yeah, thanks, but...”

“Yay!”

The hug definitely felt different, now that we were both sopping wet and in our bathing suits.

“Get any LP?”

“Way more than usual.”

“Let’s stay like this for a bit.”

I nodded. It felt a little strange to be hugging in the bath, but it also felt weirdly nice. It wasn’t long before I thought I heard footsteps. And then the door opened.

“Is this where you are, Noir?” my father asked. “Wh-wha-what...is this what I think it is?!”

Crap, everyone’s home!

I was flustered, but he was probably more upset.

“I mean, I guess your mother and I used to...no, well, I guess we still *do* sometimes...but you’re only sixteen, all right? It’s still too soon for you to explore things like this. Save the bathroom fun times for when you’re older.”

“Emma was just washing my back. See? We’re wearing swimsuits.”

As I frantically tried to explain, I heard Alice’s voice drawing near. I started to despair.

“Father, have you foun... Father, bring me your sharpest blade and join me in the living room.”

“Alice, it’s not what you think,” I protested.

She dragged us down silently to the living room and sat us down on the floor next to Olivia. My master was passed out drunk, and we were still in our swimsuits.

“I would never normally get this cross with you, Brother dearest,” Alice said. “But I simply cannot stand for this. There are two reasons. First, I am your little sister, so I have authority over who you spend the rest of your life with.”

I was at a loss for words.

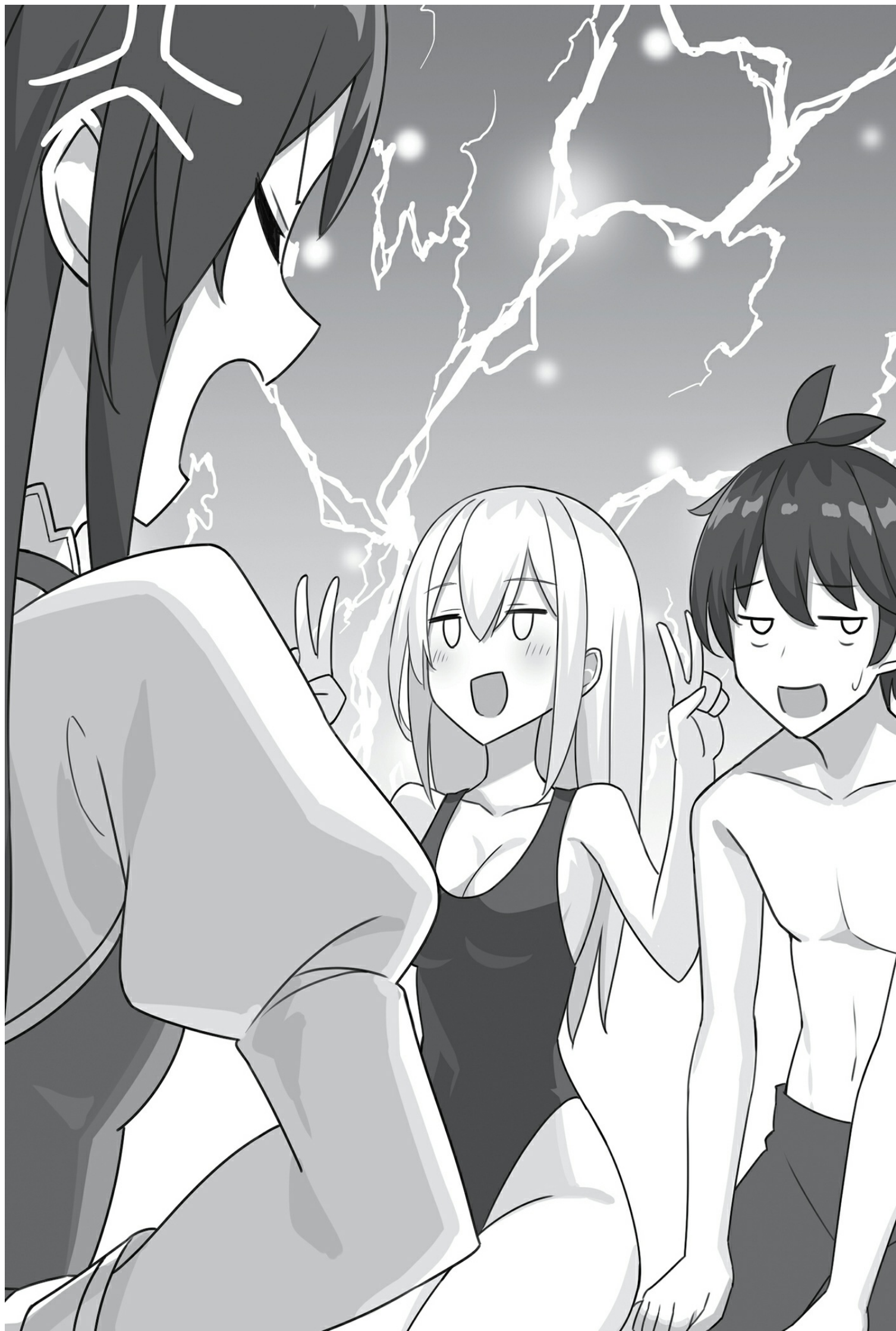
“I do believe that, eventually, you will marry and have se—ahem, those types of relations,” she said. “However, I...I insist that it be with a person I approve of! And Emma...I still don’t entirely approve of you!”

“Aha,” Emma laughed. “Alice, you’re so silly.”

Oh, no, Emma was still drunk! She was making silly faces and flashing peace

signs again.

A vein throbbed on Alice's forehead. "*Secondly*, and this is the big one, the bathroom is for the whole family to use, so you shouldn't be having se— participating in such activities in there. For the sake of the entire Stardia family, I have taken on the unpleasant task of explaining this to both of you!"



The bathroom was a common area, so I understood why Alice was so upset about it. Unfortunately, Emma just pushed her breasts together and cocked her head to the side.

“Huh?”

Alice’s eyes were cold as ice. I frantically tried to cover for Emma.

“Look, I’ll admit we were hugging, but you’ve got the wrong idea about everything else. We really weren’t doing anything like that. See? We’re both in bathing suits. Plus, if we were gonna do it in the bath, then...”

I glanced over at my parents. They were completely down for the count. I silently pleaded with them to rescue me, but Tigerson was the only one who responded to my cry.

<Humph, do humans not court in the bath? I believe I have heard Noir’s parents making flirtatious noises in there.> “Tigersooooon!” my father said, frantically trying to shut him up. “Don’t I always water your flower for you?! Here, I’ll give you some right now!”

“Now, Alice,” said our mother. “It sounds like there’s been a misunderstanding, and Noir seems remorseful. Why don’t you forgive him?”

“But, Mother!”

“Let’s keep the waterworks in the bath,” she said. “And be happy that Noir’s arm has healed.”

“Humph... I guess you’re right. Brother dearest, are you feeling better?”

I smiled and nodded, thankful that my parents’ intervention had saved me from Alice’s wrath. Of course, after all that, I’d developed a serious curiosity about “bathroom fun times.”

It wasn’t a school day, but the inter-school tournament was taking place soon, so I still had to go to the campus. Apparently, it was just a little meet and greet with representatives from the other school. I reached the teachers’ lounge, and Ms. Elena waved me in.

“Sorry for making you come on a day off,” she said. “It’s just a quick face-to-face today, then we’re done.”

“Are we still waiting for the representatives from the other years?” I asked.

“No, it’s just you today. Ideally, we’d have all three of you here, but the second-and third-year kings have rather...unique personalities.”

It sounded like they were rough around the edges. But apparently, the other school was only sending one representative too, so it wouldn’t cause offense. While we waited for the other party to arrive, I had something to drink and gave Ms. Elena a shoulder rub.

“Ahhhh, Noir, are you sure you don’t want to become my personal masseur when you graduate?”

“I think I’ll have to pass,” I said. “When you eventually got bored of my services, my life would be in shambles.”

“Ah ha ha! That’s a good point! But man, you really are good at this.”

While we chatted, another teacher came to let us know the party from the other school had arrived. We immediately got up to meet them.

Outside the door was an intelligent-looking man, presumably the teacher, and behind him, a girl dressed mostly in white. Her elegant dress had a bow on its chest, she had long, almost white hair, cool eyes, and a small, tense mouth. Her figure was slim but looked mature.

“My name is Torche,” said the teacher, bowing politely. “I am an instructor at the Gifted Institute. We are here to meet the wonderful students and staff of the Hero Academy.”

The girl bowed too. Manners were clearly important at their school. Our teachers returned the greeting, and Torche introduced the girl.

“This is Emilia. She is participating in the tournament.”

“Hello, my name is Emilia Celistage, and I am a third-year student at the Gifted Institute. I am truly humbled to be here in your magnificent school. I am very much looking forward to the tournament.”

Ms. Elena gently tapped me on the shoulder, and I stepped forward.

“I’m Noir Stardia, and I’m a first-year here at the Hero Academy. I’m honored to attend the upcoming tournament and have the opportunity to learn from you.”

Emilia gave me a gentle smile and offered her hand. When I took it, my face twisted in pain.

“Ngh.”

Her grip was so powerful! She was definitely doing it on purpose. I took the opportunity to use my Discerning Eye, but her stats were concealed.

Instead, I forced a smile. “I think you can let go now.”

“Goodness! How rude of me. I am nervous and have behaved quite boorishly.”

I decided to play along with her act for the moment.

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” I said. “I mean, who hasn’t gotten nervous and squeezed too hard before? It wouldn’t surprise me if someone’s even broken some bones that way.”

Emilia’s eye twitched, just for a moment, before her smile returned. She picked up the hem of her skirt and curtsied.

“I look forward to competing with you, Noir.”

“I do too.”

The teachers chatted amongst themselves, and that was that.

“Was she trying to pick a fight with that handshake?” Ms. Elena asked after they left.

“Felt like it. That was no normal handshake.”

“Thought so. Well, good luck at the tournament.”

“I intend to win.”

“That’s the spirit.”

I couldn’t lose. Afterall, the pride of my school was on the line. I headed home, raring to fight. On the way back, I felt someone staring at me. I was sure

someone was following me, so I waited until I reached a more secluded area, then turned around.

“What do you want, Emilia?”

There was no teacher this time. It was just her.

“Goodness, you noticed me. I wasn’t quite satisfied with our earlier conversation, so I just found myself following you.”

I took issue with being stalked, but at least we could finish our conversation now.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“I’m sure you are aware, but I intend to win the tournament. Still, I won’t be in the first round, so I worry that I won’t have the opportunity to meet you in battle, Noir.”

Her smile never wavered as she provoked me. She was implying that whoever they put forward first would take out all three of our representatives single-handedly.

“Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that you’re right,” I said. “What do you wanna do about it?”

“I suggest a friendly sparring match.”

Before I could answer, Emilia waved one hand and a giant frog appeared beside her. It was almost six-feet tall, but it was chubby and seemed slow. Still, it definitely packed a punch. Emilia watched my reaction and pulled a sword out from her Pocket Dimension, looking smug.

“You keep a frog in your Pocket Dimension?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t be silly, the frog lives somewhere else. I used two different skills.”

The frog was a summon then, called forth from some other dimension.

“Ribbit, ribbit.”

The frog shot out its tongue. I dodged with a sidestep and managed to avoid it. Still, it had a long range, and it could pull its tongue back really fast.

“Heh, pardon my minion. He wasn’t trying to attack. He just wanted to lick

your adorable face.”

“How am I supposed to know what monsters want?” I said. “If he tries that again, I’ll cut his tongue off.”

“Think you can manage that? Garma, eat.”

The frog’s tongue shot out and pulled Emilia’s sword into its mouth.

Huh? Won’t he get cut?

Apparently not. In fact, quite the opposite. As it ate the sword, it transformed. Sword-like thorns grew all over its body.

Name: Metamorphic Frog

Level: 127

Skills: Metamorphosis; Regrow Tongue

I guess eating that weapon changed its body?

“Garma, get me a lick of Noir’s pretty hair.”

“Ribbiiit!”

This time, its whole tongue was like a sword. It shot toward me.

Kachink!

I raised my own sword overhead, knocking the tongue away. But the frog was a living thing, and its movements weren’t entirely predictable. It attacked again, aiming for my face this time. I twisted away to protect my head, but it did manage to cut a chunk off my bangs.

“I’ll take that,” said Emilia. “You see, my hobby is collecting hair from cute boys.”

As she moved forward to collect it, I fired off a Lightning Strike, but the frog protected her with its tongue.

“Ribbit?!”

It twitched and trembled with the shock, but it didn't seem to do much damage.

"That must have hurt, Garma. Noir seems strong, so let's go home."

"You really are capricious, huh?"

"I beg your forgiveness," said Emilia. "But I have determined that you are worth fighting. Let us continue this at the tournament. Good day, sir."

She picked up her skirt and curtsied, and the frog vanished into thin air. Apparently she could treat it just like an inanimate weapon. She walked away, giving me a clean target, but shooting people in the back wasn't exactly my style.

"I'm gonna beat her fair and square."

Bring on the tournament!

That morning, Olivia's house was finally ready for her, so we all gathered around to see her off. She looked each of us over with tears in her eyes.

"I haven't been this happy in ages. You have to come visit me. Promise you won't forget poor old Olivia..."

"As if we could forget you," I said. "Your new place is just a five-minute walk away!"

"Ah ha ha ha! I guess you're right. Plus, I plan to visit every day."

Apparently, she'd taken a liking to my mother's cooking. Despite everything, she felt at home here.

"Ah, the Stardia family. What am I going to do without you all? Well, Noir, let's get going."

"You got it."

I walked her to her new home, not that Olivia needed an escort.

"That reminds me," she said on our way. "Noir, how much LP do you have now?"

“About thirty-four thousand.”

“I guess you used a lot to regrow that arm, huh?”

“Yeah, but I’m heading back into the dungeon today. I might be able to collect a few more enchanted items.”

“Let’s talk more when I’m moved in.”

“I can’t wait.”

Mr. Domado was waiting at the house to hand over the keys. It was all Olivia’s now. We walked into the big yard, which was far fancier than the one at home, and immediately started talking about the new skills I’d learned. For example, I wanted to know if I could hide in a box of Stone Walls and rain stones down on my enemies.

“It’s not a terrible idea, but I’m not sure you’d be able to hit anyone if you can’t see them.”

“Oh, right. What if I target the areas where my opponent might dodge?”

“I like it. I think it’d work even better if you had Shukuchi!”

It was a skill that would let me close in on an opponent, even faster than Front Step and the like. It was one of Leila’s specialties. It cost me 2,500 LP, and Stone Rain cost me 1,200.

As soon as I acquired them, I started practicing. Stone Rain summoned rocks about five or six yards above someone’s head. It didn’t have much range, but once the stones appeared, they just fell. It only took a few seconds. Then I practiced Shukuchi. It took me all morning to get the basics down.

“When you hit 100,000 LP, I’ll treat you to some extra fun training,” she said.

“I’m counting on you, Master.”

For all Olivia’s shortcomings, she always had my best interests at heart. She was probably trying to motivate me to get all that LP.

After lunch, I headed to the hidden dungeon and went straight to the seventeenth floor. I still needed to find the stairs, but I wanted to search for more enchanted items first. After all, the last time I was there, I had been

interrupted by the Black Lancer.

I took out the Bell of Perception and walked around. Dealing with the masked men again would have been a pain, so I hid whenever I saw them and waited until they passed. After six or seven hours of searching, I acquired two enchanted items—a cup that could chill water in seconds, and a knife that made your opponent catch a cold. They were both rather unique, but LP was my main priority. Between them, they earned me 5,900 LP.

The bell wasn't reacting anymore, so I went back to searching for the stairs. I asked the Great Sage for their locations and noted down his response. Then I marked my current location and headed off toward the closest one.

The first stairs were just in between some trees, but when I descended them, my path was blocked by a wall.

"Maybe that's not it? Or maybe I'm supposed to destroy it? I should try the others first."

I returned to the spot I'd marked and consulted my notes to find the second spot. They led me to a rock on the beach, with the stairs hidden beneath it. I tried going down.

"Again?"

It was just the same as before: another wall. I returned to my landmarked spot and hurried to the third.

It was located just inside the mouth of a cave. I descended the stairs, feeling a little nervous, but this time something else awaited me there—a long hallway. It was a familiar sight in this dungeon, so it seemed like this was the right one. It was also a good place to leave things for the day, so I headed home.

When I got there, someone was waiting outside for me.

Who would be waiting around in the cold and the dark like this?

When I got closer, I saw that it was Mira. I'd told her where I lived, so I supposed it wasn't that strange.

"I've been waiting for you, Noir."

"Well, this is sudden. Did something happen?"

“I never fulfilled my end of the bargain, remember? I brought you a weapon.”

She pulled an incredible spear out of her Pocket Dimension. That’s when it hit me: right, I’d won the drinking contest!

“You really did come through!” I said. “I thought that was just the alcohol talking.”

“I always keep my word. Also, you got time to come with me? Daddy wants to thank you. It won’t take long.”

“I guess I can’t say no to that.”

We walked down the dark street together. Mira was brimming with curiosity as she asked what I did with these enchanted items. I explained that I consumed them and turned them into power for myself.

“Oh, but don’t worry,” I said. “I promise I’ll take good care of the weapon you gave me.”

“What are you talking about?! You can do whatever you want with it! Sure, I like enchanted items, but I don’t care how you use them. Honestly, I kinda want to see it in action.”

I guess I’ll have to demonstrate!

First, I used my Discerning Eye on the spear.

Reaching Spear

Grade A

Sharp Edge; Extension

Spears had the longest reach of any melee weapon, and this one could extend even further. And it was A-Grade too. Mira was so awesome to give me such a valuable item. Converting it would get me...9,200 LP?!

“M-Mira, this is worth a *lot*. Are you sure you wanna give it to me?”

“Come on! Go ahead and blow it up already!”

It really wasn't that flashy, but I went ahead and converted it. The weapon disappeared into thin air.

“You didn't just put it in a Pocket Dimension?” she asked.

“Nope. It's gone. I don't even know where they go when I convert them.”

“Huh. I was expecting something more explosive.”

“Ha ha... Well, not much I can do about that.”

She seemed a little disappointed, but it didn't take long for her mood to improve. It was one of the things I really liked about her.

“Here it is,” she said.

“Wow, it's so big.”

The store was almost twice as big as I'd imagined, and probably three times the size of a regular weapons shop. It had a strange feel for a weapons shop though: sort of regal and antique.

“A wealthy elderly couple built it to live in,” Mira explained. “But their son decided to sell when they passed. Come on in.”

We stepped inside. They were still remodeling the place, but there were already a few weapons on display. Whoever decorated this place had good taste.

“We're not quite ready to open yet,” Mira said. “Daddy, Noir's here.”

“Oh, you came!” Mr. Stoke came from behind the counter with a big smile on

his face. “Thank you for helping us find this wonderful property. We’re already preparing to open.”

“And I hope to be one of your first customers,” I said.

“I hope you will be! As a token of my thanks, I wanted to sell you some of the weapons we can’t use. Mira said you were looking for anything, even defective ones. Is that right?”

“Yes, if you can part with them for cheap, I’d be happy to take them.”

Mr. Stoke took me to an open wooden box in a corner of the shop. Inside was a pile of swords, axes, and all sorts of weapons.

“These are all damaged or poorly made, so we can’t sell them. You’d be doing me a favor if you took them.”

“Thank you very much!”

The front door creaked open, attracting our attention. A fair-skinned man in a black cape walked in. He was quite handsome and gave a little bow before addressing Mr. Stoke.

“My apologies for intruding upon you so late this evening, Mr. Stoke.”

“Did something happen, Mr. Nord?”

While Mr. Stoke spoke to the man, Mira leaned in to whisper in my ear.

“He’s the vice-guildmaster of Shiva.”

“Shiva?!”

Crap... I’d said it out loud, and now he was looking at me.

“Who is that boy over there?” Mr. Nord asked.

“That’s Noir, my daughter’s friend.”

Mr. Stoke introduced me, and Mr. Nord approached with a faint smile.

“Are you a student?” he asked. “Where do you go to school?”

“Um, the Hero Academy.”

The look in his eyes changed. “How wonderful! What class are you in?”

“S-Class.”

“Ahh! What a glorious night! A chance meeting with such a bright young mind! I’m the vice-guildmaster of Shiva!”

It didn’t get any less shocking. I mean, this guy didn’t look older than his late twenties, at most. He had to be incredibly talented to be a vice-guildmaster already. Either that, or he had some great connections.

Mr. Nord swept his arms open dramatically. “I want to scout you. Why don’t you join my guild? Of course, we don’t mind you prioritizing your studies.”

“I’m sorry, as much as I’d love to, I can’t. The thing is...I already belong to Odin.”

An awful feeling washed over me. Moving instinctively, I leapt out of the way and drew my sword. The air was thick with an almost homicidal rage. I could see the hostility in Mr. Nord’s face. I had no idea what was going on, but one thing was certain: this man was extremely dangerous.

“Oh, so you’re one of Odin’s adventurers, huh? Stolen right out from under me. Hmmm, yes, Odin...”

He had a sword at his hip, but he made no attempt to draw it. I tried using my Discerning Eye, but his skills were hidden. Still, I didn’t need to see them to know he was immensely powerful.

“All right, now,” said Mr. Stoke, interrupting the strange atmosphere. “I don’t know what’s going on, but let’s keep this peaceful.”

“Yeah,” said Mira. “Come on, Noir, put that away, will you?”

I sheathed my sword, and Mr. Nord flashed a suspicious smile. There was something terrifying about his pale face and false cheer.

“I’ll take my leave for today. Do take care of the item we discussed. You won’t regret it.”

He raised one hand and headed for the door, then turned around to face me.

“Noir, tell me, did they teach you to draw your sword in the middle of a polite conversation at Odin?”

“Is it Shiva’s custom to direct homicidal rage at someone in the middle of a ‘polite’ conversation?” I asked back.

He looked puzzled for a moment.

“Ah ha ha! I’ve memorized your face and name!” he announced loudly, after which he left the shop.

I was drenched in sweat.

“Noir,” Mira said. “Are you okay? You don’t look well...”

“I guess you don’t get along very well,” said Mr. Stoke.

They both seemed worried.

“We belong to rival guilds,” I said.

“I heard there were several guilds here,” said Mr. Stoke. “I’m sorry, I didn’t really understand the intricacies of that.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “You just got here. Don’t worry about it. Let me take those weapons off your hands.”

I stowed them away in my Pocket Dimension and bid them farewell. I was a little exhausted from that encounter.

“Come by again to hang out, okay, Noir?!” Mira said.

“Will do.”

We waved and said our goodbyes.

As I walked home, I was a little scared that I might have attracted another stalker, but thankfully nothing unusual happened.

Chapter 9:

Inter-school Tournament

THE TOURNAMENT WITH the Gifted Institute took place a few days later. I was in top condition, prepared for whatever was to come. I'd already converted all the weapons Mr. Stoke gave me. Even identical-looking weapons could be worth different amounts of LP, depending on their condition. None of the individual weapons had been worth all that much on their own, but thirty of them together earned me 11,500 LP. That left me with a comfortable forty-seven thousand, opening up my options in combat.

The tournament was taking place in a large arena in town. It was normally used for fights between humans and monsters—sometimes just for entertainment, and sometimes open to betting. Between both schools, over a thousand people would be watching, so it would have been hard to accommodate them at the Hero Academy. I arrived at the arena just before nine. Emma and Leila waved to me from the entrance.

"Noooir, give it your best today!"

"Mess them up on our behalf!"

It was nice to have them cheering me on.

"I'm the first-year, so they'll probably send me out first," I told them. "I just have to do what I can."

"Well, if anyone can beat all three of them, it's you, Noir! You'll take top prize!"

The students voted for their champion from the winning team, and the schools put up a prize for whoever won. That was my goal, but either way, I still wanted to settle things with Emilia. They weren't going to put her up first, so I'd need to beat at least one other person to get to her.

I went down the hall and headed for the waiting room. When I found a sign that read "Hero Academy Representatives," I went inside. It was a sparsely furnished room, with little more than a desk and a chair. There were two people waiting inside—a boy who was sitting on the chair with his legs spread

wide, and a girl who was leaning on the wall. The boy glared at me.

“You’re the first-year representative?”

“The name’s Noir.”

“Well, you sure don’t look strong. But if you’re here, then I guess you gotta be half-decent.”

He had short hair without bangs, and his small pupils made his expression seem harsh. Even though he was sitting down, I could tell he had excellent balance. I decided to use my Discerning Eye on him.

Name: Fing Barabbas

Age: 18

Species: Human

Level: 145

Occupation: Student

Skills: Boxing (Grade A); Agility (Grade B); Stamina Up; Impact Palm, Afterimage Step

Ooh, he really *was* strong. I was higher-level, but he had some skills I hadn’t heard of. The way the King of the School Year Competition worked meant that it was about more than just pure strength. For example, even a relatively weak skill like Telekinesis had a huge advantage. But this guy didn’t seem like the type to win with tricks.

“I’m Fing. Hand-to-hand’s my forte. I’m a third-year, but this is my first time participating in the tournament.”

He shot the girl a look. She kept her arms crossed.

“Liddy,” she said. “I use daggers. It’s my first time here too.”

Name: Liddy Locun

Age: 17

Species: Human

Level: 72

Occupation: Student; Seeker

Skills: Throwing (Grade A); Faithful Short Sword; Pocket Dimension (Grade C); Booby Trap Perception

Seekers primarily explored dungeons. So she was working on the side too. Actually, didn't that make me a seeker? Student, adventurer, seeker... I had a lot on my plate.

She had a similar skill set to the leader of those thieves I'd fought a while back. Faithful Short Sword allowed her to manipulate a dagger relatively freely after she threw it. With the Throwing skill and a Pocket Dimension for support, it was easy to predict how she fought.

"So do you mind if I go out first?" I asked.

"What?" said Fing. "Are you crazy? I'm going first."

"Huh? I figured you'd put the first-year out early, to test the waters."

Fing frowned. "This is a sudden death tournament. If on the off chance you're really strong, you'd beat all three of them and claim the ultimate prize, right?"

"Yeah," Liddy agreed. "Then you'll get the item from the Gifted Institute. I dunno if you know, but there's an unwritten rule: the prize is always an S-Grade item."

Oh, so *that* was how it worked! The losing school gave a prize to the winner. If that prize really was an S-Grade item, I could understand why both of them wanted a shot at it. Of course, that just increased my resolve.

"Well, then I really want to go first," I said.

"Of course you do," said Fing. "So what do we do? Fight to settle the order?"

"That would just be counterproductive," said Liddy. "It's stupid to waste our strength before facing our opponents."

She had a point.

"Then what *do* we do?"

“I have an idea,” she said. “We’ll use this.” Liddy held something up. It was just a normal, everyday coin.

“I’ll hide it in one hand, and you have to guess which one. Everyone gets five guesses. Whoever gets it right the most gets to go first.”

“Sounds good to me!” Fing agreed.

But I wasn’t so easily convinced.

“Liddy, I know you have Pocket Dimension. Are you planning to use that to cheat?”

“You have Discerning Eye?” she asked.

I nodded. The two of them were shocked.

“Now *that’s* impressive!” said Fing. “You really are a cut above the rest. So, Liddy, were you planning to trick us?”

She panicked. “N-no, I-I-I w-w-would never d-d-do that!”

We glared at her. Obviously, that was *exactly* what she had been planning.

“All right,” said Fing. “Then how about Noir and I do a coin flip?”

“No, I have Pocket Dimension too.”

“Aren’t we honest! You coulda just kept that to yourself.”

“This arrangement might only be temporary, but we *are* a team, and I don’t see what I’d gain from deceiving my teammates.”

Plus, it wouldn’t feel good to win that item by cheating. Fing seemed moved by my gesture.

“You really are a good kid. But really, how do we decide?”

Right, Fing couldn’t compete with either of us fairly. Fortunately, the door opened, and Ms. Elena came in.

“It’s starting soon,” she said. “Have you decided who’s going first?”

“Ms. Elena, perfect timing!”

I explained the situation and asked for her help. When she agreed, we started our guessing game. Here’s how the results shook out: Fing got it right four

times, Liddy was right three times, and me? I was right exactly...zero times! If only we'd had to guess which hand the coin *wasn't* in! Because I'd clearly mastered that.

Ms. Elena laughed. "Luck isn't on your side today, huh? You're just gonna have to sit and wait this time, Mr. Finisher."

It wasn't like I had another option. What a pain!

As the tournament began, we moved from the participants' entrance to the arena. It was a big circular space, filled with dry sand and dotted with partially buried human teeth and monster bones. It gave the place a certain visceral feel. The audience was in tiered seats above us, so everyone could get a good view. This place was huge. Even if the entire student bodies of both schools were here, there would still be room left over.

"Woooo! You can do it, guys!"

"We'll run you out of the Hero Academy if you lose!"

"Show 'em the power of the Gifted Institute!"

"Teach them just how strong we are!"

Everyone seemed really excited. Five hundred people had traveled from the Gifted Institute to support their representatives. It was a long way to come, so they had to be super enthusiastic. Including students from the Hero Academy, that made for a crowd of over a thousand. Voices of all sorts filled the air.

"The audience seems like they're having fun," Fing chuckled.

He sounded a little over it. I kind of agreed; I wanted to keep a cool head. We gathered in the center of the arena, along with the representatives from the Gifted Institute, one of their teachers, and Ms. Elena. There was a familiar face amongst the representatives from the other school. My eyes went wide.

"Mira?! What are you doing here?"

"Whaa? Noir?! I could ask you the same thing!"

"Why are you surprised?" I asked. "I'm one of the representatives from the

Hero Academy.”

“What a coincidence! I guess you’re going last too?”

“Yeah, luck wasn’t on my side.”

“I didn’t even have a chance. Stupid school regulations!”

That was when I noticed Mira was the only one of them not in uniform. Even the Gifted Institute students in the audience were wearing them, so it was clearly some kind of requirement.

“Wait,” I said. “Is this what you meant when you said you had other things to do here?”

“Yeah! This tournament’s the other reason I’m here. It’s so annoying!”

Was that really the right word?

Ms. Elena stepped in. “I see you’re friends, but you need to be quiet while we explain the rules.”

In the end, the rules were simple: no killing; you lose if you’re knocked unconscious or verbally surrender; and no going up into the audience.

“We will referee the tournament,” said Mr. Torche, the teacher from the Gifted Institute. “You may put all your skills on display, but you will fight respectfully and without malice. Now we will begin with the first round.”

The rest of us had to watch the match from a spot slightly above the arena. The Gifted Institute’s observation box was on the north side, while ours was on the south. Before Liddy and I left, I used my Discerning Eye on their first contestant.

“Fing is strong, right?” Liddy asked.

“He’s strong and he has unique skills,” I agreed. “But his opponent is strong too.”

Fing’s opponent was an impressive-looking guy with long black hair.

Name: Todd Quincy

Age: 17

Species: Human

Level: 160

Occupation: Student

Skill: Hair Metamorphosis; Manipulate Hair;

Hair Extension

First off, he was a *really* high level. Mira was the same way. Maybe the Gifted Institute was full of students who were more powerful than your average adventurer. Also, his hair-related skills were creepy as hell.

The audience's excitement swelled, and the match finally began.

"All right!"

Fing charged straight in while Todd's hair grew to an unnatural length and tried to capture him. It was so fast that Fing didn't stand a chance.

"Hee hee hee, weak."

Todd laughed creepily, but the smug look on his face was quickly wiped away. Fing vanished from the tangle of hair and appeared next to it, still sprinting. That was probably an illusion caused by his Afterimage Step.

Fing smirked. "Yeah, you sure are weak—Impact Palm!"

He smashed the heel of his palm into Todd's side, sending him flying several yards.

Nice!

But Fing wasn't so pleased. "You...blocked it with your hair, huh? And it was really hard..."

It seemed Todd could adjust its strength with Hair Metamorphosis.

"Hee hee! That was the first and only chance you'll get."

The flow of the fight changed dramatically after that. Todd's hair looked like black tentacles as it attacked Fing. Even with his Afterimage Step, Fing was quickly captured. Todd's hair twisted around his neck, biting into his skin.

"Hee hee hee, better surrender before you pass out."

"Ugh...I...surrender..."

"Good boy!"

And with that, the first match was over. Fing was taken to a medic, just to be

safe.

“Ugh...I guess I’m up next,” said Liddy.

“Good luck.”

She nodded, but she didn’t look very confident as she entered the arena. She probably knew she was at a disadvantage here, and those fears proved to be correct.

Liddy pulled a knife from her Pocket Dimension, threw it, and manipulated its trajectory. Several knives flew through the air toward Todd, but he plucked each and every one out of the sky with his hair. Ultimately, it even snaked around Liddy’s ankle and hung her upside down.

“Hee hee, looks like everyone at the Hero Academy is a pathetic weakling. Come on, surrender.”

“Ngh... I surrender.”

That was two losses in a row for us. I was the only one left standing between us and total defeat. As I descended into the arena, the jeers from the audience were unbearable.

“Hero Academy suuuuucks!”

“The Hero Academy’s so weak. They can’t even put up a fight!”

“And this last guy looks even weaker than the first two!”

Maybe this sort of thing was inevitable. As much as this competition was meant to bring the two schools together, it clearly also stoked the rivalry between them. Plus, they had been encouraged by their two consecutive wins. Still, our side wasn’t much better.

“You’re all a disgrace. Go home.”

“How did those losers end up representing our school?!”

“They’re not good for anything except snatching badges. We don’t stand a chance...”

“Look, we don’t care if you lose, just don’t embarrass us, okay?”

It only got worse from there. The heckling was probably coming mostly from

the second-and third-years, but I still could have used a little encouragement.

“Come on! You guys need to cheer on your own classmates! Noir’s really strong, he’s gonna wipe the floor with them!”

“Yeah. The only reason you’re all sitting here is because he beat you.”

It was Emma and Leila. I supposed they couldn’t stand to hear me bad-mouthed. That made me really happy. I flashed them a thumbs up, determined to win this thing.

“Yeah, you can do it, Noir!”

With Emma’s encouragement, I turned to face Todd. He looked a little irritated.

“Humph, you sure have some cute friends there. I bet you have a lot of fun at school.”

“Never a dull day!”

“I despise people like you. No wonder you Hero Academy kids are so weak; you spend all your time flirting.”

“Why don’t you say that again after you’ve tried to beat me?”

“Hee hee, I’ll make you regret setting foot in here!”

“Begin!”

With perfect timing, Ms. Elena called the start. Todd’s hair shot straight at me, and I fired off a three-foot-wide Stone Bullet.

“It’s huge!”

Todd was shocked by the size of the rock and focused all of his attention on it. He caught it with his hair and held it up in midair.

“Y-you had me a little off guard,” he said. “But I caught it.”

“All right, well, please stay put for a moment.”

I took out one of the spider silk balls and threw it, gluing his hair to the rock with its formidable stickiness. I repeated this a few more times, until Todd grew impatient.

“Hngh, it’s sticky! I can’t move...”

I sprinted past the boulder, closed in on him, and...

“Hah!”

I sliced his hair off, right in front of his eyes. The rock fell to the ground, and I held the point of my sword to his neck. It was just as well I’d seen him fight Fing and Liddy. I wasn’t sure I would have come up with that strategy otherwise.

“You try anything and I’ll slice your throat open,” I said with a smirk. “Feel like finding out which of us is faster?”

“Ugh... I-I surrender.”

And with that, my first opponent was down.

Emilia looked overjoyed as she joined me in the arena.

“That was a most unsightly defeat for us,” she told her allies. “But I’m grateful to have an opportunity to face Noir in battle.”

Todd didn’t reply. He just hung his head as he left the arena. Typical Emilia: sweet and proper on the outside, but rotten to the core.

“Maybe you shouldn’t act so cocky,” I said. “You could lose, you know.”

“Me? Lose? Perish the thought. Even if it were technically possible, we won’t lose today. After all, we have Mira.” It seemed even Mira’s classmates recognized how strong she was. “You may be friends, but don’t assume that she’ll go easy on you. Only one person earns the right not to wear a uniform. You’ll never beat her.”

“Not even if I manage to beat you?” I teased.

Emilia’s face was expressionless, but she seemed angry. Still, she had stalked and attacked me. The least she could do was laugh off that little jab!

“Just so we’re clear,” she said. “I wasn’t going all-out last time we fought.”

“Neither was I.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Torche, reading the room. “Begin!”

Emilia summoned the Metamorphic Frog, fed it a sword like she'd done before, then summoned another creature. It was a white snake, about six or seven yards long.

Name: White Snake

Level: 55

Skills: Squeeze

It seemed weaker than the Metamorphic Frog, but it was still big. If it got hold of me, it was probably over.

"A frog and a snake," I said. "What an impressive combination..."

"Oh ho ho! Their names are Garma and Nyx. You see, their species prey upon each other. In other words, they're natural enemies." And yet here they were, standing side by side. "My training has turned them into allies. Uniting two such diametrically opposed creatures is an art."

I see. So she'd deliberately picked them to show off her skills.

"Well, this is what I'm using," I said.

"A morningstar?"

I spun the Shockwave Morningstar around and slammed the ball into the ground.

"Wh-what on earth?!"

Emilia trembled, and the monsters were frozen with fright. I settled on attacking the frog first. I made a beeline for it as it launched its blade-like tongue at me. Jumping with all my might, I fired a Water Drop from up high over its head. When I landed, I hit the soaked frog with an Ice Ball. Soon, a lot of its body was frozen.

"Ribb...it..."

The ice cooled it down until it couldn't move.

“My poor, sweet Garma... ngh! Nyx, get him!”

The snake slithered toward me, but when I threatened it with Holy Flame, it stopped and flicked its tongue. It was apparently really averse to fire. That was perfect. As the snake hesitated, I took the chance to Bestow an A-Grade Lightning Elemental Weakness on it. It cost 2,800 LP in total, but I had LP to spare. Having a good reserve really did make fighting easier!

“Nyx! What are you waiting for? Bite his stupid head off!”

“Hissss!”

Unluckily for the creature, it did as she said. I fired a Lightning Strike from my fingertips.

“Sss...?!”

The White Snake let out a little cry and collapsed. It convulsed for a few moments, then just lay there with its mouth open.

“Its tail is moving,” I said. “It’s still alive.”

Having made sure of that, I walked up to Emilia and pointed my sword at her.

“I could have fried it to a crisp, but I get the impression that you care about your little pets. Maybe you should surrender so you can tend to them.”

“Y-y-you’ve bested me, utterly.”

Shockingly honest at the end. If only she’d been like this from the start. Then maybe we would have gotten along.

Emilia’s minions had taken quite a lot of damage, so she sent them back where they’d come from to rest and recover.

“Noir...I must thank you for being so considerate of my pets.”

“No big deal.”

“I am still a student of the Gifted Institute, so I cannot resent you for your victory. But I would like to give you a little thank you. Mira is a genius with enchanted items, and since she arrived in town, she has acquired another incredibly powerful weapon. Do your best.”

On that rather serious note, Emilia left, and Mira took up her place in the arena. The stands were buzzing with excitement. Even the people outside were cheering.

“You’re incredible! The best!”

“Thanks for redeeming us!”

“Damn, who knew the Hero Academy had someone that strong?”

“But Lady Mira is up next! She’s the strongest in our whole school. We’ve got this!”

Meanwhile, Mira and I were extremely calm.

“You sure are strong, huh, Noir?” she said. “You surprised me.”

“Still not a fan of going last though.”

“You should learn to take a compliment. Well, no matter who wins, our friendship won’t change, right?”

“Of course. And I hope to keep patronizing Santage Arms and Armor too.”

“That’s not what I meant! Well...I wouldn’t have you any other way. You don’t need to hold back. For the first time in ages, I’m planning to unleash my full power.”

Mira’s expression changed. Somehow, she seemed drastically more confident. I took a moment to examine her powers again.

Enchanted Item Mastery: Senses are heightened and physical abilities are amplified while in contact with an enchanted item. Furthermore, when the enchanted item possesses skills of A-to C-Grade, the item is functionally upgraded by one level. This effect only applies while the item is in use.

Wh-what an incredible ability! Even just using it with a normal enchanted sword or shield increased your physical abilities. But the scariest part was how it upgraded skills—boosting C-Grade skills to B-Grade, B to A, and A to S. She clearly *really* loved enchanted items. I gripped my sword and tried to fire myself

up.

“The final battle will now begin!” said Ms. Elena.

The moment I heard her voice, I rushed in with lightning speed. Mira had one of those magic balls in each hand. She bounced them off the ground, one after the other, and sent them straight after me. I had to stop them. I knocked one away with my sword.

“Ngh, that was heavy...”

It had a skill that made it heavier. I couldn’t get to the other one in time, so I tilted my head to avoid it. It burned as it grazed past my cheek.

Now both balls were behind me, but I hesitated to make my move. Thanks to their Automatic Return ability, the balls whizzed through the air and back into Mira’s hands.

“These things are great!” she said.

“You have a skill on them that makes them heavier and bouncier, right?”

“Bingo. I’m a treasure hunter, so I have all *sorts* of enchanted items.”

Adventurers and seekers hunted for treasure, but it wasn’t our primary focus. We spent most of our time in dungeons. Treasure hunters, on the other hand, would go anywhere so long as there was treasure to be had. I heard they were active over very large regions.

“How long have you been treasure hunting?” I asked.

“Since I was three. I had something that could sense enchanted items, so I looked for stuff in all sorts of places.”

Talk about being born with a silver spoon in your mouth...

“And I have so many exciting items now!” she said. “But for now, think you can defend yourself against this ball?”

As she threw it, I edited the +10lbs skill to +0.1lbs and caught it with one hand.

“I made it lighter.”

“Seriously...? I-If you’re faking, that must’ve really hurt. Why don’t you try it

again!”

I could have just done the same thing, but this time I broke its Elasticity skill. The ball was too heavy, so it wouldn’t bounce very well. Thunk, thunk. It bounced pathetically and came to a stop.

“I made that one too heavy.”

Mira looked astonished. This sure was a cakewalk when you had the LP to spare. She brought a hand to her cheek and laughed with delight.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha! I knew I liked you, Noir! I wasn’t very excited about the tournament because I was sure I was gonna win. But now I’m actually having fun!”

Mira put on an earring. This was no normal piece of jewelry.

The Gift of the Spear Earring

Grade A

Skills: Spearmanship (Grade S); Manipulate

Spear; Rapid Thrust; Stamina Reduction

It gave abilities to its wearer. That Spearmanship skill would have been A-Grade if it weren't for Mira's Enchanted Item Mastery. But the earring had a detrimental skill too. It made the wearer's stamina drain more easily. I created the skill Mental Fortitude Reduction and Bestowed it on Mira.

"I got my hands on a nice lance recently," she said. "I'm gonna use it."

The item Mira showed off so proudly was an extremely plain and simple spear. The only unusual thing about it was its color: the handle was jet-black, and the blade was just slightly paler.

Interdimensional Lance

Grade S

Skills: Cut Spacetime

Hold on a second...that name sounded familiar. Wasn't that the weapon Olivia had sold the other day? That must have been what Emilia was talking about.

"See this thing?" said Mira. "My dad bought it off a real pretty lady for like three hundred mil. I thought he'd been scammed again and got mad, but once I tried it out, it was obvious that it was special."

"That 'real pretty lady' was probably my master..."

"Seriously?!"

Olivia said she'd sold it off because it wasn't very powerful, but that was by her standards. In reality, it was an S-Grade weapon that could apparently cut through the fabric of spacetime.

"She's a really incredible person," I said. "I never imagined that Mr. Stoke was the one who bought it from her."

"Luck really isn't on your side today, huh?" Mira asked. "But luck's part of the competition, so let's go!"

She closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye and attacked with a practiced thrust. I parried with my sword, but only barely. Next, she unleashed a torrent of powerful attacks. Some of them were extraordinarily fast. That was likely her Rapid Thrust skill.

She poked several holes in my shirt, and unable to hold her off any longer, I stepped back to get away. When she tried to give chase, I fired off a Lightning Strike. Mira smirked.

"The Reversal Mirror Buckler."

Mira pulled out a small round shield that had been polished to a mirror shine. I thought I'd landed a direct hit with my Lightning Strike, but it bounced off the shield and hit me instead.

"Gahh..."

Pain racked my body, but the damage wasn't very serious. My S-Grade Lightning Resistance was doing its job.

"Gotta watch out for mid-and long-range magic attacks, ya know?" Mira grinned.

"You sure have a lot of nice weapons," I admitted. "But using a lance while holding a shield is hard."

"Of course it is," said Mira. "But I can also fight like *this*."

She cut a vertical line through the empty air, and something really strange happened. A hole appeared. It was as big as Mira and pitch-black inside. I couldn't see anything in there.

"There's more where that came from," said Mira.

She ran around me, slicing holes in spacetime as she went. Her shoes had the Mercury's Sandals skill, so she was exceptionally fast. When she returned to her original position, she was out of breath.

"Haah, haah, you see...these holes are connected. A person could go in one and come out another."

"But you're not doing that?"

"Exactly, because I'm doing *this* instead!"

Mira threw the lance into one of the holes with all her might. I knew it! She was using her Manipulate Spear skill! And I was surrounded by these holes. The lance came flying out of the one directly behind me.

"Whoa?!"

I just about managed to dodge. The lance vanished through one of the other holes.

"Haah, haah, haah..."

Mira was panting hard. She held her shield up to guard against any direct attacks, but she was visibly exhausted. That detrimental skill was really doing a number on her, and the skill I'd given her on top of that was no doubt taking effect too. I pretended to dodge the lance and used the opportunity to get

closer to her.

I balked. “Huh...? Where did it go?”

The moment I spoke, the lance appeared from the hole behind Mira and flew right past her face. I ducked away, but it had really caught me off guard. That was close! I needed to wait for the right moment.

“You know, I’ve been exploring this hidden dungeon,” I said.

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

“I’m no Mira Santage, but I have some pretty good enchanted items myself. So as powerful as these attacks are—”

I sensed the lance coming from the hole diagonally behind me and pulled out the Shield of Champions to block. At the same time, I used Stone Rain to manifest rocks above Mira’s head.

“What the?!”

Unsurprisingly, Mira noticed right away and ran. But I predicted where she was going, threw my shield away, and used Shukuchi to close the gap between us. I took a powerful step toward her and swung my sword.

“Gyaah!”

Mira was terrified, but I stopped just before my blade made contact.

“Y-you’re not gonna hit me?” she asked.

“I would never hit a friend. But I’d appreciate it if you surrendered.”

Mira was sitting meekly on the ground, breathing raggedly and utterly exhausted. She took off the earring.

“I’d normally try to hold on a little longer, but I don’t think I have the energy.”

“Even when you’re low on stamina, a lot of people can push through with willpower. That’s why I gave you a skill to reduce your mental fortitude.”

“So that’s how you did it.”

Exhausted as she was, Mira stood up and raised her hands.

“I surrender! You win!”

Yes! It had been hard work, but I'd survived all three matches!

The students from the Hero Academy cried out for joy, while those from the Gifted Institute fell silent.

"Good going, first-year! You're a real king!"

"I can't believe you beat all three of them! That was so cool!"

"Thank you for preserving the honor of the Hero Academy! Thank you!"

"That's our Noir! I knew you could do it!"

The last one was probably Emma. I found her in the crowd and waved. Next, I got rid of the Mental Fortitude Reduction I'd put on Mira.

I'd spent several thousand LP during the tournament, but I still had plenty to spare. Situations like this were probably why Olivia wanted me to earn so much.

"I got rid of that skill I gave you, by the way," I told Mira.

"Thanks. I'll tell my dad to give you a discount when the shop opens."

"I appreciate it."

Ms. Elena announced the Hero Academy's victory to the crowd. I'd never heard cheering so loud. She also announced that they'd be collecting votes for the overall winner.

"Why even bother?" Mira cut in. "Noir obviously won."

"I think so too, but rules are rules."

"Well, it's stupid if you ask me. Also, why are you crying, Mr. Torche?"

"Perhaps you will understand when you're older..."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but it must've been rough. Maybe his salary was going to be docked or something? That would suck.

When all the votes were counted, Ms. Elena returned to the center of the area.

"I will announce the results for the Award of Excellence. The votes are as follows: Fing Barabbas, 5 votes; Liddy Locun, 1 vote; Noir Stardia, 1,123 votes!

Which means the Award of Excellence goes to: Noir Stardia!”

“Who the hell voted for the other candidates?” Mira grumbled amid the earsplitting cheers. “Relatives? Fans?”

More likely just people who hate me.

Next, the teachers from the Gifted Institute gave Mr. Torche a box, and he brought it over to me.

“Now the Gifted Institute will present Noir with his prize!” Ms. Elena shouted. “Come forward!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I was really excited. There was a good chance this would be an S-Grade enchanted item! I stepped forward and...

Bonus Chapter: New Knowledge

ELENA FROM THE HERO ACADEMY and Torche from the Gifted Institute observed the tournament as referees. The battle between Noir and Mira was so full of twists and turns that it would have had anyone on the edge of their seat.

“Ms. Elena, you are quite beautiful,” Torche said suddenly.

“Well, uh...thanks? But there’s still a fight going on.”

“Indeed, but the result is obvious. Noir is an excellent fighter, but he will not defeat Mira,” Torche said confidently.

“We can’t know that until the battle’s over,” Elena replied, sounding calm despite her rising anger. “Things could turn around at the last second. You never know.”

She knew this from experience, but Torche laughed hysterically.

“Are you confident enough for a wager? If Mira loses, I’ll become your dog whilst the votes are counted.”

“What do you want from me if Noir loses?” she asked.

“How about a date?”

“A date? Sure, you can have your way with me for a day. Whatever you want. But if Noir wins, your new name is ‘Spot.’ Sound fair?”

Torche was quite thrown by her boldness. His head filled with fantasies of spending a whole day with such a beautiful woman and getting to *have his way with her*. Of course, he hated the idea of acting like a dog, but it hardly seemed possible.

“O-only if you agree to it, Ms. Elena! But I must ask, why are you making such a rash wager?”

“Rash? I believe in my student, that’s all. Even if he loses, I won’t go back on my word. But trust me, he won’t lose.”

“Impossible! Absolutely impossible! Mira was practically born to use

enchanted items!" he said proudly. "I'll let you in on a secret: whenever she uses them, she increases their power!"

In fact, the tournament was practically built for her. Even an average adult or adventurer wouldn't stand a chance.

However, Elena was growing bored and irritated. "Don't think you're the only one with special students," she argued pointedly. "Noir's pretty incredible himself."

"Oho, do you really think he can outdo Mira?"

"Well, he *has* inherited Olivia's powers."

With that, Torche's attitude changed completely.

"Y-you don't mean the legendary adventurer, Olivia Servant...?"

Elena just flashed him a half-smirk. Torche was shaken.



“I’m a bit of a history buff myself,” he shot back. “I know about the marks Olivia’s achievements have left all over our world. *And* her unique skills. But she never had any progeny. You really shouldn’t lie.”

“Hey, would you look at that, your precious pupil’s on the ground.”

Torche’s attention was quickly drawn back to the fight. He’d been so sure of Mira’s superiority, but Noir was much more capable than he’d imagined. Ultimately, Noir was victorious. Torche trembled in disbelief. He looked over at Elena slowly and was greeted with an impish smile.

After that, they had to ask everyone in the crowd for their pick for the Award of Excellence. The students formed a line, verbally giving their vote as Elena marked it down in her notebook. Meanwhile, Torche sat on the floor next to her like a dog.

The Gifted Institute students grimaced at him. “Um, what are you doing, Mr. Torche?”

“P-please, don’t get the wrong idea...”

“Come on, Spot! Hurry up and ask the question.”

“Who do you think deserves the Award of Excellence...woof?”

It was a strange sight for his students. Or for anyone, for that matter. But Torche couldn’t complain. After all, he’d brought this on himself.

“Noir was the best.”

“Thank you...woof.”

Torche was from an upper-class family. He’d never struggled a day in his life. This humiliation brought him to tears for the first time since his birth.

“You know, he’s kinda cute like that.”

“Yeah, it’s adorable seeing him like this. And kinda funny.”

Torche was shocked to see how the female students reacted. He’d never imagined they’d find his dog impression endearing.

“Perhaps there are times when the teacher is the one learning a lesson,” he said.

Elena cleared her throat. “Ahem.”

“Woof!”

In his mixture of shame and elation, Torche had learned something new.

Afterword

HELLO AGAIN, Seto here. We're already at Volume 6, huh? Though I guess it isn't really progressing all that fast. I started writing this series about four years ago, after all. If I'm honest, I don't really remember what I was thinking back then. Probably just something like, "Man, I wish I was Noir..."

I mean, even if he is on the lowest rung of the aristocracy and has some bad things happen to him, he has such a cute best friend, and I think he comes out on top in the end. If only there had been a girl like Emma in my neighborhood when I was growing up. I blame my parents. Hopefully, they'll think about what they've done!

Anyway, all jokes aside, somehow I've managed to continue working on this these last four years. A whole lot has happened in that time, including my proudest moment as a writer: when my series got an anime adaptation. It was announced a long time ago, so you probably all know by now. Luckily, it'll be airing in January of 2021!

When my editor, Shou Ji, told me it was happening, I was more shocked than happy. It didn't really feel real until the next day. That's when the joy hit me. I remember striking a victory pose. There are probably a lot of different kinds of people writing light novels, but I think most of them hope that, one day, their work will be adapted into an anime. This is one of my dreams come true. Just the thought of seeing my characters moving around gets me excited. It won't be long before I can actually watch it, and I really can't wait!

I helped out with the adaptation to the best of my ability. Every day I think about just how many people it takes to make an anime happen. The first meeting for the project involved the anime staff coming to meet me. I foolishly thought it'd just be a director and maybe a scriptwriter or something. I mean, how many people could there be? So I was really nervous when I found myself in a meeting room with about twenty people. I hadn't been that nervous since elementary school. I even blanked out on how to greet people and started wondering if I'd become stupider since my school days.

The people I met that day, and many more people who I didn't, are all working hard to make the *Hidden Dungeon* anime a reality. When I think about that, I'm overwhelmed with how incredible anime is. I can play a little guitar and bass, but I could never pursue music professionally. When I'm watching a good anime, I can pretty much guarantee that the music will get me hyped up. They must have some incredible people in charge, people with good taste and a lot of knowledge.

But I don't know the first thing about visual art. I have no doubt an elementary schooler could draw better than me. I have so much respect for illustrators, manga artists, animators, and designers. Does being bad at drawing make you self-conscious? I remember trying to draw a giraffe once, and someone thought it was some kind of cryptid. Can you believe that?

Voice acting is incredible too. I got to listen in on a dubbing session, and it's amazing how they can bring the characters to life with just their voices! And they respond to requests and give very specific kinds of performances. They're real pros. It's incredible.

Maybe the more people who are involved in something, the more hearts it touches. Even with sports, you might be impressed by the athletes' accomplishments, but there are a ton of people supporting them in the background. Maybe other kinds of entertainment are like that too. Some people can do incredible things all by themselves, but anime isn't one of those things. The really incredible thing about anime is how many people come together to make it.

Anyway, I think the story works really well in that format. It'll be interesting, not just for readers of the novels and comics, but for newcomers just starting with the anime. Set your expectations high!

And now to thank some people. First, I'd like to extend a heartfelt thanks to Takehana Note, Shou Ji, the designer, the proofreaders, and everyone else involved in the production of this volume.

Also, the fifth volume of the manga adaptation will be out on December 9th, 2020! Tomoyuki Hino produced some really incredible art again this time, so I hope you'll pick it up.

The only reason this series is being made into an anime is thanks to all of you. It wouldn't have happened without the support of my loyal readers! Let's enjoy the anime in January! I'll see you next time~!



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